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Methodism at the Round Table: E. Stanley Jones’s practice of conversations with non-Christian communities as a Model for Wesleyan Mission in a Plural World

E. Stanley Jones was perhaps the twentieth century’s most significant missionary working out of the Methodist tradition. Jones’s evangelistic ministry was truly multifaceted and global. This paper will focus on three primary practices of his evangelistic ministry in India: large-group evangelistic lecturing followed by a question and answer session, round table conversations, and Christian Ashrams. His writings are also important to his evangelistic ministry, but his writings differ in at least one important respect from these three practices. They do not intentionally include an element of conversations with non-Christian communities. And of his many contributions to the theology and practice of mission and evangelism, his understanding of conversations with non-Christian communities as central to evangelistic ministry is perhaps his most important. These three practices specifically integrated non-Christian communities into a conversation about faith in general, and Christ in particular, in a vital way that is relevant to contemporary conversations on how Methodism might engage other faith traditions. While Jones was clearly committed to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, his model of mission and evangelism, belief in human equality, and understanding of the scientific method encouraged practices that nurtured genuine conversation from a distinctly evangelical point of view.¹

¹ E. Stanley Jones, *Christ at the Round Table* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), p. 21. The practices of experimentation, verification, and sharing of results are critical to his theology of evangelism.

In this paper I explore these three practices of Jones's evangelistic work as they relate to conversations with non-Christian communities. I also reflect on some of the theological foundations that encouraged his interest in conversations with non-Christian communities. When I began my research, I thought that the round tables conversations were the primary venue for in-depth discussions with non-Christian communities. But the more I researched, the more I realized that all three practices worked together in Jones's ministry and each could inform current Methodist theology and practice. His model offers an evangelical vision in which the Christian story is proclaimed, but in a venue in which Christians also listen to stories that guide other traditions. In other words the round table is a place where Christians both evangelize and are similarly "evangelized" by persons from other religious communities.

Introduction to E. Stanley Jones' Influence and Ministry

Eli Stanley Jones was born in 1884 and had a conversion experience when he was seventeen. From that point on, he had an unwavering commitment to Christ as God's unique and supreme representative. Following graduation from Asbury College, Jones landed in India in 1907 at the age of 23 as a missionary with the Methodist Episcopal Church. While his life and ministry centered in India and the United States from that point on, his reach was truly global. He began his ministry in India by serving as the English-speaking pastor of the Methodist Church in Lucknow. By the end of the 1930s his preaching ministry expanded to Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, other areas in the Middle East, Burma, Malaya, the Philippines, China, and Singapore. By the end of his life, he had published twenty-seven books, two of which sold over one million copies. In 1938 *Time* referred to him as "the world's greatest missionary." In 1964 *Time* said that only Billy

Graham could rival Jones's international reputation. Reinhold Niebuhr called him one of the great saints of his time.²

In 1962 Jones was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and in 1963 he received the Gandhi Peace Prize. His influence can be measured in his periodic meetings and correspondence with such important figures as Presidents Roosevelt and Eisenhower, General Douglas MacArthur, John Foster Dulles, and Japanese Emperor Hirohito. His work as a liaison between Roosevelt and Japanese diplomats in October and November of 1941 is seen by some as almost avoiding (if only postponing) the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.³ He was asked to put his name forward in 1944 as the U.S. Prohibition Party presidential candidate, a proposal which he rejected.⁴ He was elected to the episcopacy of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1928 but withdrew his name the morning after his election. His support of the Indian Independence movement led to his banishment from India for a number of years. Concerns about communist sympathies led to the FBI developing a file on him.⁵ He was a friend of Mahatma Gandhi and Jones referred to his murder as the greatest tragedy since the crucifixion of Christ.⁶ On Jones's 80th birthday, over 75,000 persons gathered from the Mar Thoma Syrian Church to celebrate his life and ministry in India.⁷

His influence and the expanse of his evangelistic ministry justify calling him one of the most significant Methodist evangelists since Francis Asbury. But critical to

² Stephen A. Graham, *Ordinary Man Extraordinary Mission: The Life and Work of E. Stanley Jones* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), p. 397.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 335-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁶ E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1963), p. 13.

⁷ Graham, *Ordinary Man*, p. 367.

understanding his evangelistic ministry is appreciating the role of conversations with non-Christian communities in it. He sought truth wherever he might find it, a characteristic that made him quite willing to submit Christianity to the scrutiny of its critics and be willing to be in conversation with persons from quite divergent traditions. He sought conversation with persons from other traditions because, if there was a better representative of God than Christ, he wanted to know it. He believed that there are people in other traditions who, like him, sought truth and would want to hear what Christ had done in Jones's life. He lived in a tension between certitude of Christ's supremacy and a great openness to truth wherever he might find it. In the end, though, he never discovered a more perfect representative of God than Christ and he never seemed to question the need for redemption from sin that Christ offers. His commitment to Christ, desire to share the good news he found in Christ, and his openness to truth in other faiths, led him to offer and test his faith through these three practices of public lectures, round table conversations, and Christian Ashrams.

Public Lectures and Question and Answer Sessions

Despite the global nature of Jones's ministry, the epicenter of his work in the 1920s and 1930s was India. Even in the later decades of his life, when he spent more and more time in the United States, he continued to view India as his home and it is here that he developed these three practices. The first point of contact between Jones and most Indians was large evangelistic lectures. Jones's public lectures followed a standard pattern. Events centered on a specific city for a week or weekend. Jones preached each morning in gatherings that were specifically designed for local Christian communities. Evening lectures focused on topics of interest to local intellectuals from other religious

traditions. While the topics in the evening varied, they always included Jones sharing his experience of how faith in Christ affected his life. The entire week or weekend was facilitated or chaired by local persons, many of whom were not Christian. Lectures usually took place in public halls, open spaces, Hindu temples, or schools and almost never in churches.⁸ Each aspect of this standard pattern was designed to encourage persons from other religious traditions to come and listen to the evening lectures.

A number of aspects of these public lectures are different from other large evangelistic gatherings of the day, both in India and around the world. First, for a number of reasons, Jones did not refer to them as “crusades” but rather as “lectures.” First, Jones believed the term “crusade” was highly problematic, being so associated with Western imperialism that the negative connotations could not be overcome. Second, while Jones usually spoke for 45-60 minutes, he rarely concluded with a traditional evangelistic “call” to Christian faith, as did the mass meetings of the day. Rather, he closed with a time of question and answer, which was then followed by an invitation for anyone interested in hearing more about Christ to join him and others for further conversation. Questions were either submitted ahead of time or voiced in the public session. While Jones would not critique other traditions in these question and answer sessions, many in the audience frequently critiqued his Christian faith. He welcomed this challenge, writing that his goal was to express his experience of Christ in the public lectures and then provide a venue for others to “break” it if they could.⁹ These “grilling” sessions as he called them usually lasted from 1-2 hours.¹⁰

⁸ E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon, 1925), p. 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Third, Jones believed that his primary target was educated Indians, in stark contrast to the Indian mass Christian meetings of the day, which focused on poorer populations. The educated tended to be people, usually men, of influence in the community. Jones thought that engaging community leaders was critical to efforts to overcome barriers to conversion that often kept entire communities from making public faith commitments for Christ. Overcoming ingrained barriers to conversion was one reason Jones came to believe that public baptism, for instance, was not mandatory to Christian commitment.¹¹

Fourth, Jones's focus on educated populations also led to a focus on intellectual instead of emotional conversion, though he clearly believed emotions were part of the conversion process. While a conversion might be very emotional, emotion was not the center of the process, as he thought it was in the mass movements. Jones believed that a true conversion, which includes both emotion and intellect, takes time. His understanding of conversion as a journey is similar to John Wesley's. Therefore it is not surprising that Jones concluded these lectures with an invitation to further conversation about Christ, similar to John Wesley's practice in field preaching where he concluded not with an invitation to conversion as Whitefield did, but rather with an invitation to Methodist society and class meetings. In these society and class meetings conversations were encouraged that nurtured persons through personal struggles and doubts. Jones began these conversations in the question and answer sessions after public lectures. Perhaps the immediacy of the question and answer sessions was necessary for Jones, since he typically spoke to groups of people who were from non-Christian communities

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 88-89. Jones left the issue of Christian baptism to one's conscience and the New Testament.

and perhaps encountering Christianity in a significant way for the first time. The result is that in the question and answer sessions Jones was frequently asked about Christianity's relationship with other faith traditions. In this way the question and answer sessions after public lectures involved more conversations with non-Christian communities than Wesley's field preaching events usually did.

As we consider how Methodism today might converse with the world's non-Christian communities, another important aspect of these public lectures and question and answer sessions is Jones' refusal to critique other religious traditions in public lectures.¹² He concluded that debates focus on winning arguments instead of discovering truth.¹³ Rather, he presented what he had discovered in Christ, his experience of God through Christ, and left others to form their own conclusions. He did critique other traditions in print, arguing for Christ's uniqueness and supremacy over other religious traditions, but he did not do so in the public lectures.

These large lectures were critical to gathering groups of people from other faith traditions who wanted to engage persons from the Christian faith. They became the first point of contact between Jones and people interested in Christ, providing a venue for initial conversations. But they did not offer the personal, long-term conversations that Jones thought that most people require for true, life-long conversion. More intimate conversations took place in the next two elements of his evangelistic ministry, round table conversations and Christian Ashrams.

Round Table Conferences

¹² Ibid., pp. 21-22.

¹³ E. Stanley Jones, *Along the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon, 1939), p. 36.

The second key practice of Jones' evangelistic ministry, which also included significant conversations with non-Christian communities, is his round table conversations. Jones describes the first round table conference as an accidental creation. After a public lecture and question and answer session sometime in 1923, a Hindu chairperson of a public lecture asked Jones if they could schedule a more private session with a small group of the city's "leading figures."¹⁴ The chairperson suggested a tea party for a smaller group of people, which would allow for a more personal conversation than even a question and answer session afforded.¹⁵ Jones agreed and by 1925 these smaller gatherings became integral to his ministry and a regular part of his public lectureships.¹⁶

A regular format for round table conferences soon developed. The gathering usually consisted of between 15 and 40 people. Jones tried to ensure that approximately two thirds of the participants were non-Christians, with the remainder being primarily Indian Christians. Everyone was asked to share only their religious experience and specifically "how religion was working, what it was doing for us, and how we could find deeper reality."¹⁷ The focus was on the practical effect of faith in a person's life. The goal was to discover other people's actual experience, not their understanding of dogma or doctrine. The focus must be "deeply experimental. What does religious bring in

¹⁴ These "leading" figures are almost always educated men. I could find no reference to a woman participating in, much less leading, either public lectures or round table conversations. Ashrams, however, always included both genders and in this way "modeled" the Kingdom of God according to Jones.

¹⁵ Jones, *Round Table*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Graham, *Ordinary Man*, p. 181.

¹⁷ Jones, *Round Table*, p. 15.

experience? What is its value for life?"¹⁸ The focus of conversations was not theology but the experiential benefits of faith. The round table conferences provided a venue for pointed conversations about different faiths, conversations where Jones believed an "untrammelled" Christ eventually stood at the center.¹⁹ Round tables were conversations among people from various religious traditions, secular philosophies, and ethical systems, who gathered as equals to share about their experience of religion.

Jones wanted to know if the gospel he knew as a citizen of the United States would sound like a gospel in India. He writes:

When we had stripped our [Christian] life of overgrown verbiage, how much fact would we have left? Would our gospel ring true to reality? Would it move amid these problems of life with assured poise and conscious power? Would it face life and answer it? Was our gospel a broken light from God illuminating patches and portions of life, but leaving unilluminated life as a whole? Or was it God's adequate answer to man's need-intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social?²⁰

And Indian communities were perhaps the best one's in which to ask these difficult questions of the gospel, for in it lived:

The most religiously inclined race of the world [containing] a people who have persistently searched for God and Reality as no other people on earth have searched...What answer would they bring from that hoary past and this heaving present? Would it be an adequate one?"²¹

The goal of the conversations was two fold. The first was to bring together people from India's various religious traditions.²² The second was to create a space for educated Indians to specifically contemplate Christianity. In this way the gatherings were both interreligious and evangelistic. Every person was invited to share around the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

²¹ Ibid., p. 23.

²² Richard W. Taylor, *The Contribution of E. Stanley Jones* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1973), pp. 10-11. Taylor argues that the round table conferences were at the time the only true place of interreligious conversation in India.

table and evidently only in a handful of cases throughout the years did someone choose not to share.²³ The conception of a round table was intentional, since nobody was head of the meeting. Jones himself never started the sharing and resisted attempts to summarize or comment on other people's sharing. He usually shared at the end.

As in the lectures, the desire in the round tables was to steer away from debate and arguing. The goal was to have true conversation sharing each person's experience. The result was that people from each tradition were challenged, even Christians, regarding the source and substance of their faith. The result was an "attitude of appreciation with appraisal" of all religious traditions.²⁴ Jones came to believe that these round table conferences provided the greatest venue for true conversation between people of different faiths.

To be clear: Jones intended Christ to be central in round table conferences. Participants certainly recognized that a Christian, Jones or someone from his ministry, initiated the round table conversation, even though people from other traditions often hosted the gatherings. As far as I can tell, Jones almost always spoke last, and, while he tried not to sum up what others had said, he evidently was the person most people wanted to hear speak. I can find no evidence of him participating in a round table in which he was the only Christian voice, or one that was clearly organized by people from other traditions. Finally, it is clear that Jones believed that Christ is God and the only real hope in life. "The Name of Christ," Jones writes, "shall be above every name, not through propaganda, or any trick of fate, nor even through heavens' proclamations, but because it

²³ Jones, *Round Table*, p. 46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

is inscribed in the constitution of our universe and in the make-up of our own souls.”²⁵ Nevertheless, these round table conferences do seem to have had a remarkably hospitable and inclusive tone. Jones did seem to truly want conversation, not monologue, and the only way to really encourage such dialogue was to give, at least as much as possible, everyone an equal seat at the table.

Christian Ashrams

While public lectures and round table conferences were the two primary places for conversations between people of multiple religious and non-religious communities in Jones’s ministry, Christian Ashrams also provided an important venue for further and more intimate conversation. Jones’s Christian Ashrams developed out of the Indian model of ashrams (good evidence that he was indeed willing to learn from other religious traditions and to indigenize the Christian faith). Ashrams literally mean “apart from hard work” and are part of the Indian religious landscape. Jones’s ashrams were retreats, often lasting a week at a time. Jones eventually purchased multiple Ashram locations, the first and most significant being at Sat Tal in 1930. While Hindu Ashrams typically center on a religious guru, Jones tried not to be the center of the retreat, though he was clearly the guiding figure. This retreat setting allowed participants to have multiday conversations about Christianity in settings that included prayer, fasting, work, and worship.

The Ashrams intentionally included people from various religious traditions, yet all participants were to have a “willingness to search sincerely for God’s truth with other members of the Ashram on a basis of complete equality.”²⁶ They became the place where people who had encountered Jones first in lectures and engaged him and Christ

²⁵ Ibid., p. 272.

²⁶ Graham, *Ordinary Man*, p. 13.

more deeply in round table conversations, could actually engage the practices of a Christian life in a more concentrated and personal way.²⁷ These practices included worship, preaching, prayer, bible study, sabbath, and work. Discipleship and sanctification of believers were certainly central to the Ashram movement, but Ashrams also provided an important venue for conversations with non-Christian communities to continue beyond public lectures and round table conversations.

Jones's Theological Foundations for Methodist Conversations with Non-Christian Communities

A number of theological foundations undergird the practices associated with public lectures, round table conferences, and ashrams that are pertinent to Wesleyan conversations on how Wesleyans engage other religious traditions today. First, Jones believed in humanity's oneness. "The human heart and the human mind," he wrote, "are the same throughout the world....there are no permanently inferior or permanently superior races."²⁸ Today this may seem to be an unremarkable claim, but in India in the 1920s and 30s, when the caste system was still entrenched, it was quite remarkable. Out of this foundation of equality, Jones insisted that we are all children of God with the ability to live in community with God through Christ. Jones took this claim seriously, refusing to speak in segregated churches and colleges in the United States. He even resigned as a trustee of Asbury College when it refused to integrate. In the Christian Ashrams the sign on meeting room walls was "Leave behind all race and class distinction

²⁷E. Stanley Jones, *7 December 1929 Circular letter. Unpublished.* (1929), cited in Graham, p. 395.

²⁸ ———, *Along the Indian Road*, pp. 44-5.

ye that enter here,” a clear challenge to the ever present caste system.²⁹ Jones’s use of the words “brother” and “sister” was also a direct challenge to the caste system, not a reflection of Southern evangelicalism in the United States.³⁰

Second, Jones believed that God was at work in other religious traditions.³¹ Christian traditions and the Church were some of what he called Christ’s “regular” channels. But for Jones, the Spirit also operates through “irregular” channels. Irregular channels are particular activities and people who don’t claim a Christian tradition, but who act in ways Jones believed are fundamentally in line with the person of Christ. The most notable “irregular” channel was perhaps Gandhi.³² To Jones, Gandhi caught the principles of Christ.

And yet Gandhi is an example of a third important principle in Jones’ thought, namely the idea that all religions are in the end not the same; they point to very different understandings of God. For Jones, Gandhi understood the principles of Christ, but not the person of Christ.³³ Jones is frequently critical of the idea that all religious traditions are fundamentally the same, calling this “mental abdication.”³⁴ The belief that all faith traditions have the “same underlying truths”, and that the “differences are in the details”, tends to “wipe out distinctions, tone down superiorities, and have everything end in a diffused kindly feeling, or as someone has put it, ‘in a mush of amiability.’ All these things put together are disconcerting and disturbing.”³⁵ The differences among religions

²⁹ Ibid., p. 189.

³⁰ Graham, *Ordinary Man*, p. 144.

³¹ Ibid., p. 148.

³² Jones, *Along the Indian Road*, p. 67ff.

³³ Graham, *Ordinary Man*, pp. 178-9.

³⁴ Jones, *Along the Indian Road*, p. 116.

³⁵ ———, *Round Table*, p. 13.

are one of the reasons Jones encouraged round table participants not to iron out differences between their beliefs.³⁶ He thought it important, in his writings, to identify differences. He wanted people to look at the “outlook, tendencies, and goals” of different faiths and this would be difficult if not impossible if people focused on identifying “overlapping moral precepts and spiritual ideas.”³⁷ Critique wasn’t part of the round table because he believed witnessing to what Christ has done in a person’s life both built bridges with people from other communities and created a space where Christ would be revealed. And yet in his writings, Jones was critical. He believed that round table experiences demonstrated that non-Christian faiths were “bankrupt” and that only Christianity offered a “vital” experience of God.³⁸ But the focus of public lectures, ashrams, and especially round table conferences was not critique, but experience.

Fourth, the round tables and Ashrams demonstrate that for Jones, the task of evangelism is dialogical. It includes not only a witnessing to our own faith but also a willingness to truly listen to others as they share their experience of other faiths. His emphasis on listening to others share their faith experience seems to be two fold. First, when we listen to others, they are more likely to listen to us. Second, Jones believed that there was much to learn from different religion’s stories. Many other religious traditions offer some truth and life that Christians might need to hear and incorporate into their own life and faith. Even in the case of religious or secular communities that might not offer any truth, their representatives who speak for them are children of God and deserve respect. For Jones, Christians cannot expect people of other religious traditions to listen

³⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁷ ———, *Along the Indian Road*, p. 99.

³⁸ Graham, *Ordinary Man*, pp. 181-2.

to the Christian message if they are not willing themselves to listen to the message of those other religious traditions.

Conclusion

Jones's pattern of public lectures, round table conversations, and Christian Ashrams offers an interesting vision of one Wesleyan community's interaction with other faith traditions. He clearly believed in the uniqueness of the Christian faith, but his belief in humanity and the ability of all people to interact with the Holy Spirit led him to engage in open-ended conversations about the nature of various religious traditions and how people experienced the divine through them. His commitment to Christ was not a barrier to conversation with other traditions but rather opened him in dynamic ways to hearing other's faith stories and sharing his own. His three-fold evangelistic pattern of ministry, while highly specific to the context of India in the first half of the 20th century, is a model that offers insights into how Methodist communities today might develop mutually beneficial conversations with communities outside Methodism, whether faith based or otherwise.