

Christ at the Round Table (1928)

PREFACE To the Revised Edition By Anne Mathews-Younes

JONES' PARTICIPATION IN A "CLINIC OF SOULS"

MY GRANDFATHER HAD a unique approach to presenting Jesus. He nurtured this approach by listening to others carefully, in order to understand their stories and their needs. Jones strongly felt he had no right to teach (or preach) to others if he was not learning from them in turn. He writes, "I came to India with everything to teach and nothing to learn. I now learn as well, and I am a better man for having come into contact with the gentle heart of the East." One of the ways Jones listened and learned about the gentle heart of the East was through his Round Table Conferences. Up to forty leading representatives of different faiths—including agnostics and atheists—were invited to share what their faith or lack of faith meant to them. Jones would ask, "Tell us what you have found through your faith—What does it do for you in your everyday life?"

Present day dialogues with non-Christian faiths have been heralded as something new, and they are surely important. E. Stanley Jones held these conversations 90 years ago. In this Round Table context Jones asked himself whether the gospel of Christ had any certainty to offer. "Will it show itself capable of bringing to confused minds and distressed souls everywhere a new sense of reality and certainty under this awful scrutiny. If the gospel of Christ is founded upon Life will it, therefore, stand the shocks of life? Or is it a great and heroic guess at the solution to the riddle of life? Would the Round Table Conferences shed any light on these problems?" Jones continues his reflections, The more I think of it, the more I realize that the most dangerous thing the Christian Church ever did was to send us to India. Not dangerous to us. It matters little whether we live or die. But to start a moral and spiritual offensive in the heart of the most religious and philosophical people of the world, and that at a time when the weapons of modern criticism and modern knowledge are available for counter-attack, is too dangerous for words. For suppose it should be revealed amid that struggle that Christianity is only one among the many ways, that its claim to finality is untenable, that its sharp alternatives are not valid, that it is only a stage in the evolution of religion and it

will be passed by, the final stage being a sifted amalgam from the whole. What would be the result of this? In looking back at the Round Table approach, I see now how daring and decisive this approach was: Here we were putting our cards on the table and asking the non-Christian world to do the same. Suppose our “hands” with which we were playing the game of life should turn out to be inadequate; and suppose other ways of life should prove more adequate. This was a showdown, and the stakes were high. In every situation the trump card was Jesus Christ. He made the difference. The people who followed him might be spotty and inadequate, but they had hold of the spotless and adequate or better Christ had hold of them! (A Song of Ascents, 239-40).

Jones presciently speaks of the potential for the Round Table approach to address current, internal controversies in the church. The fact cannot be disguised that we as Christians have our internal controversy. It has largely partaken of the method of long-distance dueling. We have shelled each other’s positions, or what we thought were the positions, but there has been much smoke and confusion and not a little un-Christian feeling. Why not sit down at Round Tables as Christian men and women and see what religion is meaning to us in experience? We would listen reverently to what the other man and woman would say it was bringing to them, and we would share what it was meaning to us. At the close we might not be agreed, but we would be mutually enriched, and certainly we would be closer to the real issues. And we would be on the right lines of approach in facing these issues and in finding their solutions. Church and lay leaders could prayerfully give the Round Table dialogue the occasion to let the Holy Spirit guide us in listening reverently to our brothers and sisters, and allow us to be enriched by that experience. I am grateful to Dr. Mark Teasdale, Associate Professor of Evangelism at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary for his outstanding introduction to this book. His is the perspective of a 21st century professor, pastor and evangelist. He writes that E. Stanley Jones faced in twentieth-century India very similar challenges to those we face in the United States today, and how his evangelistic approach via the Round Table can be a powerful example for us. Dr. Teasdale affirms: In a world beset by acrimony and divisions, often exacerbated by religious beliefs, Christ is already sitting at the Round Table. He beckons Christians to join him there and to welcome all others who are willing to enter into dialogue. There, as we speak and listen to each other, He will

make himself known, allow us to know each other more fully, and lead us all into his grace. This book could not have been reprinted without the assistance of the Rev. Shivraj Mahendra, whose publishing, editing, and theological skills were essential to this project's success. I don't know how Shivraj finds the time to move these E. Stanley Jones reprinting projects forward with his customary speed, expertise, and precision. I am deeply grateful to him. Nicholas Younes contributed his considerable editing expertise to ensure that the text is clear and doggedly pursued the needed annotations. Barbara Hubbard brought her years of experience as an English teacher to double and triple check the grammar and punctuation. I am surrounded by gifted people and am truly blessed because of them. I trust that in turn you will be blessed by this book.

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Foreword by Mark R. Teasdale

WHILE JESUS CHRIST is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8), the context in which Christians serve Jesus changes over the years. Every generation brings with it new cultural norms, new ways for people to relate to each other, and new challenges undreamt of by their forebears. As a result, books written to help guide Christian practice have a notoriously short half-life. Their advice, no matter how excellent in their own time, often is insufficient to address what Christians face today. So, these texts are often left behind as historical relics, and new ideas are sought to help Christians with the new struggles they are facing. This is especially true in reference to texts on evangelistic missions. To be effective in evangelism, Christians must articulate the fullness of the gospel in a way that is meaningful to people in their current social and cultural contexts. However, these contexts shift so fast that books hailed as having great insights a few years ago are now considered passé. E. Stanley Jones has bucked this trend. In fact, for a man who was born in the nineteenth century and who did most of his ministry in India during the early-and-mid-twentieth century, his work has become more relevant to Christian missions in the United States as the years have advanced.

The primary reason for this has been the demographic and cultural forces that have moved the American population away from accepting the nominal Christianity that many took for granted through most of the twentieth century. Demographically, American Christians, especially Protestants, have been aging and not replacing themselves in their churches. As a result, between 2003 and 2017 the total percentage of the US population that claimed to be Protestant has dropped from 50 percent to 36 percent, while the total percentage claiming to be Christian of any sort has dropped from 83 percent to 72 percent.¹ This shift is not only caused by the natural attrition of older Christians dying without sufficient births in Christian families to offset those deaths. It is also from Americans becoming more comfortable either exiting their Christian faith or never espousing a faith in the first place. The growth of those who claim to be religiously

unaffiliated in the United States has been meteoric in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, increasing from 12 percent of the population to 21 percent of the population during the same time that Protestantism was declining.² While Christianity is still the majority faith in the United States, it no longer has a privileged place in the nation. The result of this is that Christians in the United States must take seriously the plurality of religious and non-religious beliefs people hold. To share the gospel in this new context means developing new strategies for evangelism. These strategies must shake off any assumption that Americans are favourably inclined toward Christianity and adopt a posture of humility while still offering the full hope of the gospel.

The need to change how we practice evangelism does not mean we have to abandon it. In a culture that has become unmoored from any specific faith tradition, there is a deep yearning people have for meaning. This means that even the “unchurched” are open to having substantive and respectful conversations about faith, if only Christians would engage them.³ It is at this point that E. Stanley Jones becomes an excellent guide for us through the wisdom he offers in *Christ at the Round Table*. The situation he faced in twentieth-century India is very similar to what we face in the United States today, and his evangelistic approach through the Round Table becomes a powerful example for us. When Jones served as a missionary in India, he entered a country in which Christians made up a tiny minority of the population. As of 2001, approximately 2 percent of the population of India claimed to be Christian, contrasted to the largest religions, Hinduism at 80 percent of the population and Islam at 13 percent of the population.⁴ While these numbers are reported from much later than when Jones was in India, they give us a good sense of what he faced. This was an even starker set of statistics than what we face in the United States in the twenty-first century. How would Jones reach people in such a pluralistic setting that had such low cultural credibility for the Christian faith?

During Jones’ career, there were two primary approaches missionaries used in their work. At the risk of generalizing, I will call these the monologue approach and the silence approach. The monologue approach sought to win people’s hearts and minds to the Christian faith, having that replace their current faith. As the term monologue suggests, this was done largely by the verbal proclamation of the gospel with little

opportunity for response from the listener. Jones attempted this initially in his ministry, attending public debates with leaders from other religions in an effort to persuade his listeners that the Christian faith was superior to what they already believed. However, Jones found this unsatisfying and ineffective. It both ignored what was good and right in the beliefs that most Indians already held, and it often required him to defend Western cultural norms alongside of the gospel. He needed something that allowed him to offer greater respect and interaction with the existing religious beliefs in India, demonstrating the power and beauty of Christ apart from the baggage of Western culture. The silence approach was made popular in the book *Re-Thinking Missions* (published 1932).

Written based on the Laymen's Foreign Mission Inquiry that was commissioned to determine the effectiveness of Christian missionary work in the early twentieth century, *Re-Thinking Missions* recommended that Christian missionaries would be most effective by allying themselves with other religions. Together with the adherents of other religions, they could join in a common effort to throw off the deleterious effects of non-religious beliefs, especially materialism, secularism, and naturalism. The missionaries would be silent in the sense that they would not speak about Jesus or Christian distinctiveness. They would primarily seek to be part of this broader coalition of religious people, subsuming their message to their common work.

Jones certainly agreed with the pressing need to deal with the problems of non-religious ideologies creeping into the human heart. He also agreed with the need to respect other religions, as seen in his deep friendship with Gandhi and his attendance at Gandhi's ashram. He describes all these things in this book. At the same time, he felt that this approach gave away too much by silencing the invitation for people to follow Jesus Christ. For Jones, Jesus was at the heart of Christian missions, as seen in how Jones pleaded with Gandhi to receive Jesus. Anything less was insufficient. Since he could follow neither of these approaches fully, Jones developed a third approach that combined the best from both and rejected what was problematic. From the first approach, Jones kept the emphasis on inviting people to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. From the second approach, he took the deep respect he believed was due to the adherents of other religions and the desire to overcome corrosive anti-religious forces. What he rejected was the thinking that assumed Christians could only

choose between 1) a monologue meant to proselytize adherents of other religions into culturally patterned Christian forms or 2) remaining silent on Christian distinctiveness in order to respect other religions and work for a common good. Jones contended that it was possible for Christians to share about Jesus explicitly while respecting other religions through a third approach to missions: dialogue. The Round Table was the ultimate expression of this dialogue. Simply put, the Round Table was a gathering of a small group of people who were adherents of various religions. These people each committed only to speak of how their religious beliefs had guided them in life, avoiding any doctrinal or historical debate. Each person would have the opportunity to speak while the others listened and reflected on what was said.

By creating space for this type of dialogue, Jones provided a unique arena where Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and members of other religions in India could acknowledge one another as fellow human beings seeking truth. In doing this, he also created a situation in which the relative size and cultural support each religion had was unimportant. People at the Round Table heard and spoke to each other as equals who had a common desire for a meaningful life. The Round Table allowed Jones and other Christians to show they honored the adherents of other religions by listening and weighing what they said even as they could speak freely about their Christian faith, especially their personal relationships with Jesus Christ. They could do this without any need to enter into a competition, feeling like they had to outmatch the other participants or argue for a Western version of Christianity. They could simply share their experiences of living as a Christian, even as they heard others share about their experiences of living as followers of other faiths. Jones acknowledged that this was a dangerous way of doing missions, in the sense that it did not have a guaranteed result tied to it. There was always the possibility that the people who shared about their lives under the direction of other religions would be more persuasive, winsome, and powerful than their Christian counterparts. This contrasted with the other approaches to mission that had clear outcomes (i.e., conversions from those who heard the monologue or interfaith partnerships from the silence). As you will read, Jones never entered into a Round Table dialogue without some trepidation because of this. However, he also believed that surrendering human control allowed the Spirit to move in powerful ways

among the participants, leading them all to recognize the unique blessing of following Jesus Christ.

This kind of dialogical ingenuity is what we need in the United States in the twenty-first century! In the face of the declining public place for Christianity, we can be tempted by the other approaches to mission, either doubling down in our attempts to proselytize people into particular forms of Christianity or allowing our Christian faith to be subsumed into a broader coalition made up of people of goodwill. Certainly, both these approaches can be seen in action today, often attended by the desire to reclaim the time when Christians held a privileged place in the culture. However, our wiser route would be to learn from what Jones did and take a seat at the Round Table. By surrendering any claim to privilege and equalizing our Christian experience with the experiences of others who come from different religious, and even non-religious traditions, we open the door for several benefits:

1. We bypass the heavy skepticism about evangelism that so many people have whether they are Christians or not.
2. We grow in our Christian faith as we learn to articulate our experiences of following Jesus Christ even as we listen to the experiences of those who profess other faiths.
3. We offer those who are not Christians the opportunity to hear the full message of Jesus Christ without them feeling attacked or belittled because the process of sharing the message at the Round Table is as good as the message itself is.
4. We help develop a larger community of goodwill across religious lines, as we listen to one another and work toward the common desire to live into what is good, true, and beautiful.
5. We have the opportunity to see God appear in power and grace to accomplish great things in the lives of everyone involved, all in the name of Jesus Christ.

As can be seen from this list, when practiced well Round Table evangelism offers all the possible benefits of both the monologue and silence approaches. People are invited to follow Jesus, communities working for the common good are formed, and all of this is done even as Christians speak boldly about their experiences of Christ, listen humbly to what others say about their beliefs, and see the power of God break forth. In a world beset by acrimony and divisions, often exacerbated by religious beliefs, Christ is already

sitting at the Round Table. He beckons Christians to join him there and to welcome all others who are willing to enter into dialogue. There, as we speak and listen to each other, he will make himself known, allow us to know each other more fully, and lead us all into his grace.

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