

Rufus Matthew Jones

Brief life of a practical mystic: 1863-1948

by ELIZABETH CAZDEN

RUFUS MATTHEW JONES, A.M. '01, A SCHOLAR OF MYSTICISM WHO also founded the intensely practical American Friends Service Committee, once described "practical mystics" as people who "seem to be lending their hands to a vaster Soul that is working through them."

Born into a Quaker farm family in South China, Maine, Jones learned early to sit quietly, "feeling our way," as he put it, "down to that place from which living words come." At Haverford College, he eagerly absorbed Emerson's essays and began his lifelong study of mystical experience through the centuries. After six years teaching high school, he joined the Haverford faculty in 1893.

He spent the 1900-01 academic year studying philosophy and psychology at Harvard with George Herbert Palmer, George Santayana, Francis G. Peabody, and Josiah Royce. William James was on leave, but Jones had already absorbed his work on the centrality of religious experience. That year solidified his philosophy of life, grounded in radiant confidence in "that Love which works... triumphantly at the Heart of Things" and expresses itself in service.

What Jones meant by "mysticism" was direct intuitive contact with the Divine, moments when "the walls between the visible and the invisible suddenly grow thin" and one can feel oneself "surrounded by an enfolding Presence." He believed that such experiences were available to everyone, and that this mysticism lay at the heart of Quaker experience from the seventeenth century onward. Although later historians have challenged that view, it attracted thousands of seekers into the Society of Friends. He convinced many people, as one of them wrote, that mysticism was "the most simple and natural thing in the world."

Jones's outlook was also intensely practical. He relished ordinary life, especially at his Maine summer home: the sunset over China Lake, new peas and homemade pickles, aching muscles from digging potatoes or chopping wood. He valued his "Bachelor of Haying" as much as his 13 honorary degrees. He and his wife, Elizabeth Cadbury Jones, entertained a steady stream of former students, "weighty" Quaker ministers, and college deans.

Jones envisioned a spiritual fellowship of seekers, without creed or ecclesiastical structure. His commitment to practical service propelled him, however, into active leadership in many organizations that valued his wisdom, creative vision, and humor.

During World War I, Jones looked for ways for pacifists to express the "irresistible and constructive power of goodwill." Following British Friends' lead, he started training relief workers at Haverford. In 1917 the first American Friends Service Committee teams left for war-ravaged France, where they built houses and a hospital, gave farmers tools and seeds, and tried to restore broken

spirits. As AFSC chairman, Jones visited France early in 1919, donning overalls to help hammer and dig. For the next six years, AFSC programs fed more than a million children daily in Germany and Russia. In 1924 the organization considered disbanding. Instead, as Jones urged, it expanded its work to include race relations, relief work among unemployed miners, and peace education. Jones served as either chairman or honorary chairman until 1944, providing a "buoyant spirit of radiant expectation" that stimulated others to do more than they thought possible.

Yet Jones remained primarily a teacher. For 40 years, every Haverford student took at least one of his courses on philosophy, ethics, or the Bible. He invited them to face the difficulties confronting the modern world and to "blaze a trail which would make life rich, meaningful, and thrilling." They returned his affection with friendly cartoons and a song mocking his "long and lanky bones." Haverford's president, conferring an honorary degree on Jones in 1922, called him an "impenitent optimist" who had "helped numberless young men to find themselves in finding a faith."

A popular preacher at churches and college chapels around the country, Jones could incorporate examples from daily life—a railroad journey up a mountain, or the thrill of violets and apple blossoms—into "a great vision of a God-centered universe." Many of these talks were reprinted in his 56 books and innumerable articles. His extensive speaking and writing led many to regard him as the informal head of the Society of Friends in America.

After he retired from active teaching, Jones continued to look for new adventures. In late 1938, he and two other Philadelphia Friends met with German Gestapo leaders to obtain permission for Friends to help Jews emigrate. In 1947 AFSC and its British counterpart received the Nobel Peace Prize for promoting goodwill among nations by "silent help from the nameless to the nameless." AFSC's new chairman, Henry J. Cadbury, Ph.D. '14, accepted the prize, wearing a tuxedo donated to the AFSC Clothing Room. Jones, now 84, was honored at a festive New York banquet.

During the spring of 1948, Jones suffered several heart attacks. On the day he died, he read proofs of another book, *A Call to What Is Vital*, and finished writing a speech calling Friends to "a new installment of heroic spirit." It was a fitting close to his lifelong work exploring "the deeper nature of the soul and its relation with God" and the vigorous activity that quest inspired. ▽

Elizabeth Cazden, J.D. '78, is an appellate lawyer and independent scholar who writes and speaks on twentieth-century Quakerism.

Opposite: Jones in 1925, painted by M.H. Kevorkian for Haverford College.