Mystics and Heretics in the Middle Ages : Rufus Jones reconsidered

Presidential Address to the Friends' Historical Society, 1972

WHILST Rufus Jones was alive he was too large a man, touching at so many points the life of his own Society of Friends, and of wider society, for anyone to have tried to see his work as a whole. Since his death in 1948, one side of it has become the centre of critical discussion, particularly in America: that is to say his understanding of the relationship between mysticism and Quakerism.[1] The argument has concerned the sense in which early Quakerism should be seen as a mystical movement and also about whether its modern form has this character also. My purpose is to look at an allied, but different, problem; what contribution did Rufus Jones make to our understanding of the mysticism and heresy of the middle ages and of the Roman era. I believe this approach may have some relevance to the other debate, as well as to the more restricted question of Rufus Jones' place as a scholar, who, it is hardly necessary to remind this audience, also wrote about the reforming movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and about Quakerism in America. Undoubtedly he did some of his best work in the field chosen tonight, and his work here has not, so far as I am aware, been reassessed.

The mystical stand in pre-Reformation Christianity appears again and again in Rufus Jones' books. It was the theme of two of his books and turns up frequently in his more general books on mystical religion.[2] Medieval heresy, on the other hand, provides the core of one whole book, and that one of his own favourites. The amount he wrote is by

[1] J. Calvin Keene, "Historic Quakerism and Mysticism", *Quaker religious thought*, vii (1965), 2–17; Lewis Benson, *Catholic Quakerism* (published by the author in duplicated form, 1966); and articles by Eric Holttum, R. W. Tucker and John Dobson in *Friends' Quarterly*, vol. 17, January, July, October 1971, January 1972.

[2] In addition to works cited later one may note *New studies in mystical religion*, 1927; *Some exponents of mystical religion*, 1930; *The Eternal gospel*, 1938.

any standard astonishing, especially when one bears in mind that for most of his working life he bore a heavy teaching load at Haverford and was deeply committed to three other causes: Quaker journalism, the drawing together of the sundered strands of American Quakerism, and the work of the American Friends Service Committee.[1] In all Rufus Jones wrote fifty-six books and the toll of his articles is enormous.[2] Faced with such a massive *corpus* I can only confess that I have not read it all. Long ago Isidore of Seville contemplating the still more extensive output of Augustine remarked that if anyone said they had read it all he was a liar.[3] I make no pretence to have read the complete Jones. Yet just as the great bishop of Hippo's work varies in its quality, some of it arising very much out of the needs of the moment, some of it worthy of eternity, so the American Quaker's writing varies and demands differing treatment. Some of Rufus Jones' books (and I have confined myself to them) do not make a great contribution to scholarship; they are part of his sincere and moving claim that attention should be given to the mystics' way, which he himself walked upon so attractively. In this category I would place both of his early books in this field, *A Dynamic faith* and *Social law in the spiritual world*, which appeared in 1901 and 1904 respectively. The latter was typical of this category of his books in that it was based upon lectures he had given; in this case at summer schools in Scarborough, Woodbrooke and Haverford in 1901, 1903 and 1904.[4] His first major book, *Studies in mystical religion*, appeared five years later, in 1909. After it two books stand out for the care with which they present a range of new material: *The Church's debt to heretics*, published in 1924, and *The Flowering of mysticism; the Friends of God in the fourteenth century*, which came out thirty years after *Studies*, in 1939. Most of what I shall say will arise out of a consideration of these three books. I do

[1] For his life I have used Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend of life*, 1958; this is referred to in later notes as Vining. One may also consult David Hinshaw, *Rufus Jones, Master Quaker*, 1951.

[2] Nixon Orwin Rush, *Bibliography of the published writings of Rufus M. Jones* (Waterville, Maine, 1944) contains signed work to date. Between 1944 and his death Rufus Jones wrote 5 books and 40 articles or shorter pieces: Hinshaw, *op. cit.*, 222.

[3] Cf. Peter Brown, *Religion and society in the age of Augustine*, 1972, 25. The original passage is in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 83, col. 1109.

[4] Vining, 103.

not mean by my choice to implicitly condemn his other books which deal with my theme—there are many good passages in them—but I do not think they reveal his scholarly achievement so well.

On the other hand I cannot resist drawing attention to the last of them at this point, *The Luminous trail*, published in the last year of his life, when he was eighty-four. For those who have not read any Rufus Jones this is a good place to start. Here he writes with characteristic lucidity and warmth of early Christians, of the Fathers, including one of his first loves, Clement of Alexandria, of St. Francis of whom he wrote so often, and of his own son, Lowell, who died so tragically in 1903 whilst his father and step-mother were crossing the Atlantic. The transposition to this final chapter, which could have been so awkward, is made without the least jar, so that the spiritual awareness of the young boy finds a natural place along with the example of those other far better known men and women.

Studies in mystical religion appeared in 1909 when Rufus Jones was 46 years old. In his preface he explained that it had been planned as an introduction to a series of books to be devoted to the history of the Society of Friends, which he described as "a religious body which has made a serious attempt to unite inward, mystical religion with active, social endeavours, and to maintain a religious fellowship without a rigid ecclesiastical system, and with large scope for personal initiative, immediate revelation and individual responsibility".[1] The plan had been generated by him and John Wilhelm Rowntree at least twelve years before in 1897, and work upon *Studies* had begun early in 1904 with the help of books which had been sent to him by his English friend. The whole scheme had had to be considered afresh after John Wilhelm's tragic death on a visit to America the following year. The Rowntree family and others met with Rufus Jones in England, and it says a lot for the enthusiasm and vision of that group that the decision to press ahead with the Quaker history was taken. Rufus Jones' task was defined as that of tracing "the historical development of inward and Spiritual Christianity as a contrast to the ecclesiastical and ritualistic types". The appearance of the book only four years later witnesses to the energy with which Rufus Jones applied

[1] *Studies*, xxxviii.

himself. It is said that he devoted two mornings a week to the book from 1904 onwards; it was finished in England during a period of sabbatical leave in the summer of 1908.[1]

It would, however, be concealing a great deal to trace the gestation of *Studies* only as far back as 1897 and so to consider it as a reflection of his friendship with John Wilhelm Rowntree. The seeds of the book are to be sought much earlier in Rufus Jones' life. One impulse undoubtedly came from his earliest experience as a child in a home where the practice of an "inward and spiritual Christianity" was part of the very air he breathed. His parents, Edwin and Mary Hoxie Jones, and his aunt Peace Jones who lived with them, were exemplars of the way he came to live himself and to describe for others.[2] The realization that such a way of life could also be the centre of his scholarly interest came at Haverford which he entered in 1882 and graduated from in 1885.[3] There one of his teachers Pliny Earle Chase, a man of wide interests, which stretched from mathematics to languages and meteorology, suggested to him that for his graduation essay he should write on the subject of "Mysticism and its exponents". At Haverford too he read at least the *Apology* and *Crito* of Plato, and when in his Senior year he read some history, it was under Allen Thomas who was soon to publish work upon one of the sixteenth century mystical groups, the Family of Love.[4] Home and college had therefore turned his interests to mysticism long before 1897, but the way he approached it was influenced by two further periods of study: in Europe during 1886–87 and at Harvard in 1900–1901.

In the former period, when Rufus Jones was twenty-three, he made many contacts with Quakers in this country and on the continent of Europe which were to mean much to him, but it was his four months in Strasbourg which moulded his scholarly career.[5] In later years he recalled what happened: "I had strayed off into the field of history and for a time I

1 For the writing of *Studies* see Vining, 71–3, 112–18, 123–25. The quotation comes from a type-script report of the meetings about the Quaker History.

2 Vining, 15–29.

3 *Ibid.*, 33–39.

4 A. C. Thomas, "The Family of Love or the Familists", *Haverford College studies*, xii (1893).

5 Vining, 45–54.

seemed likely to make history my major work, but after I had followed Fischer a few weeks [this was Kuno Fischer who was lecturing on Greek philosophy] I knew that philosophy was to claim me henceforth—'for this I was born'." He went on to say that previously his interest in mysticism had been steadily growing and that then he realized that "the best approach to an understanding of this great human experience was to be found in philosophy and psychology".[1] It is fascinating to speculate what might have happened if Rufus Jones had come under the influence of a great historian at this point in his development, and in some senses it was a pity that he did not. Karl Schmidt, an authority on fourteenth-century mysticism at Strasbourg, did give him help with his reading, but he does not appear to have lectured to him and Rufus Jones fairly rapidly questioned some of his views. But it is quite understandable why philosophy and psychology attracted Rufus Jones in his formative years, whilst history failed to. History was not in a healthy condition in the United States at this time, there were few chairs in it, perhaps twenty, and most of them not occupied by very distinguished figures, whereas the other two disciplines appeared to be flourishing.[2] Perhaps the outstanding scholar of that generation was William James, brother of the novelist, who combined an interest in both philosophy and psychology, never more impressively than in his Gifford lectures *Varieties of religious experience* published in 1902; a book, incidentally, referred to with approval in Rufus Jones' *Studies*.[3]

When Rufus Jones was at Harvard the previous year William James was on leave, but he was able to attend courses given by the philosophers George Herbert Palmer and Josiah Royce.[4] Royce, a friend of James, had a deep interest in mysticism and affected Rufus Jones considerably, whilst to Palmer he owed the term "the conjunct self," which crops up in a number of his early books.[5] Although perhaps neither Royce nor Palmer have many readers today, another

1 R. M. Jones, *The Trail of life in college*, 1929, 166.
2 See Dr. J. R. Pole's forthcoming article on history in the U.S. in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, xxiii (1973).
3 *Studies*, xxix.
4 Vining, 86–91.
5 One may note references to Royce in the introduction to *Studies*, xv, xxxi.

of the teachers at Harvard, then, George Santayana, probably has. Under him Rufus Jones extended his understanding of Plato and his followers.

Studies in mystical religion was, therefore, a book written by a man with a long-standing and deep interest in mysticism who looked at it through the eyes of a philosopher who was also aware of some of the trends in the new study of psychology. But it is also important to appreciate that in attempting to trace the history of Christian mysticism up to the seventeenth century he was, at least in the English-speaking world, an isolated pioneer. Dean Inge, who read certain chapters of *Studies* in proof, had it is true published his *Christian mysticism* in 1899, but neither of the other two notable English exponents on the theme, Evelyn Underhill and Baron von Hügel published early enough to be of help to Rufus Jones, and at that stage, apparently, none of them knew each other.[1] Von Hügel's *Mystical element in religion* came out in 1908 whereas Underhill's *Mysticism* did not appear until 1911. Jones came to a field which was dominated by the approach which was congenial to his own formation. In fairness it must also be pointed out that the whole historical approach to medieval mysticism was in its infancy, but so indeed was the study of medieval theology and philosophy, and so the essential intellectual background of the mystics was but hazily understood.[2] These facts are essential to an understanding of Rufus Jones' first considerable book and of his later ones.

The range of *Studies* is very wide. It begins with chapters on the mysticism of Jesus and his first disciples, particularly Paul and John. Then, after two somewhat awkward chapters on Ministry and Organization in the early Church and on Montanism, there is a discussion of the contribution which Greek and Latin thinkers, especially Plato and Plotinus, made to Christian mysticism. Then on the path lies through the Fathers, among whom most attention is given to Augustine, and from them to Dionysius, usually called the Areopagite. From him we are taken to John Scotus Erigena, the ninth century Irishman and then by another jump to the

[1] Vining, 132.

[2] M. D. Knowles, "Some recent advance in the history of medieval thought", *Cambridge historical journal*, ix (1947), 22–50 and "Further note on some recent advance . . .", *Idem.* x (1952), 354–58.

Waldensians. The temporal movement becomes gentler after this and we are led steadily forward from St. Francis and the Spiritual Franciscans, some learned pantheists of the thirteenth century, and the Beguines and Beghards, to the great figures of the fourteenth century: Eckhart, Tauler, Suso and the Friends of God. Next comes a chapter on the Brethren of the Common Life (which includes an excursus on Catherine of Siena) followed by a chapter on Wyclif and the Lollards, after which the book moves for its last pages on to post-Reformation movements. The ground covered is astonishing but certain things about this terrain need underlining. In the first place the individuals and movements studied are extremely disparate; it is difficult, for example, to subsume the very orthodox Brethren of the Common Life who affected a very considerable number, under the same umbrella as Amaury of Bêne and David of Dinant, two French teachers who were accused of pantheism, and affected, as far as we know, far fewer and those principally the learned.[1] The Waldensians hardly are a mystical sect in the same sense as either of these.[2] Secondly, one is struck by one of his omissions—the Hebrew strand in Christian spirituality which through the Old Testament and particularly the Psalms had enormous effect. Where else, for example, did the Bride Bridegroom symbolism of so much mysticism come if not from the Song of Songs? It is curious, too, to realize that there is no mention of Benedict of Nursia under whose Rule so many mystics lived in community, nor of Gregory the Great who played perhaps a crucial rôle in making the ideas of the Fathers accessible to the middle ages.[3] The whole Spanish school, represented by Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross, appears not at all. To some extent in later works Rufus Jones extended the terrain—he wrote, for example, fairly extensively on Hugh of St. Victor and St. Bernard, besides, pushing well past the seventeenth

[1] For the Brethren an admirable introduction is R. W. Southern, *Western society and the Church in the middle ages*, 1970, 331–58. For Amaury and David see Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian philosophy in the middle ages*, 1955, 240–44, 654.

[2] There is a useful survey of recent work on them and other twelfth century groups by Brenda Bolton, "Tradition and temerity: papal attitudes to deviants, 1159–1216" in *Schism, heresy and religious protest*, edited by Derek Baker (1972, being *Studies in Church history*, 9), 79–91.

[3] Jean Leclercq, *L'Amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu*, 1957, *passim*.

century to Browning and Whitman, but the large holes I have mentioned were never filled.[1]

It was only retirement from teaching in 1934 which gave Rufus Jones the chance to develop one of the themes which he had written about in *Studies*, the Friends of God in the fourteenth century. During the autumn and winter of 1934–5 he was able to spend some months in Europe extending his reading, which was to bear fruit in *The Flowering of mysticism*, published in 1939.[2] Although it grew out of his earlier work, in fact far less of the book than one might expect from its title is concerned with Rulman Merswin and the community he established on the Green Isle near Strasbourg. Its main concern is with the whole of German mysticism, and that of the Netherlands, in the fourteenth century, so space is given to Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, and Ruysbroeck, as well as to the lesser-known women whom they influenced. Two chapters, somewhat uneasily linked to the rest, on English mystics of the period and on Groote and the *Devotio Moderna*, round off the book. It is interesting to find that Rufus Jones was aware of the discovery of the original manuscript of the Book of Margery Kemp, which was only published three years before *The Flowering* appeared.[3] His reading on the German mystics too shows signs of books written since his *Studies* had appeared, although he was able to note that his account of the Friends of God still stood almost alone in the English-speaking world thirty years later.[4] At various points in the later work one can see that he had changed his opinion; he now doubted, for example, whether the austerities mentioned in the so-called Autobiography of Suso described actual events, whereas previously he had treated them as part of "this extraordinary practice of asceticism".[5] He himself points out that his former belief that Ruysbroeck was untrained was no longer tenable.[6]

In between *Studies* and *The Flowering* came a very different book on heresy, *The Church's debt to heretics*, published

1 Hugh has a chapter in *The Luminous trail*, 1947, 55–62, cf. p. 22 for St. Bernard. Browning and Whitman are in *Some exponents of mystical religion*, 1930.

2 Vining, 248–51.
3 *Flowering*, 227–33.
4 *Ibid.*, 88 note.
5 *Ibid.*, 145; *Studies*, 284 note.
6 *Flowering*, 195; cf. *Studies*, 308.

in 1925, which is also much slighter than either of them. It has, however, like them an index: an aid to scholars missing from many of his other books. Having defined heretics as people called heretics by the Church (a definition which leaves many questions unanswered) he also said that he was not interested in people who were "freakish disturber[s]" or "hysterical champion[s] of novelties", but only in those who had made "discoveries of fresh insight . . . [who were] recipients of new illumination, gifted leaders of unwon causes, prophets of neglected or forgotten truth, profound interpreters of the deeper significance of life".[1] These rather heady words serve to introduce a really rather breathless journey through Gnosticism, heresies about the nature of Christ, about the Spirit (this last taking us from Montanism to Joachim of Fiore), anti-Church heresies (which again covers a wide spectrum from Donatists to Cathari), heretical movements of the mid to late middle ages and of the Reformation. An enormous number of individuals and movements are brought under review, but it is difficult to see how some of them, for example Arius, stigmatized as the teacher of "a thin, poor makeshift for Christianity", fall within his original definition of heretics as those who had made "discoveries of fresh insight", and to appreciate just what debt the Church had towards them.[2] The book does, however, show that Rufus Jones had been able to keep up with some of the literature on his vast subject; there are references, for example, to Harnack's book on Marcion published in 1921 and to Turberville on the Inquisition which appeared a year earlier.[3] From time to time he referred to his own *Studies* for fuller information about people, and so it becomes clear how this book which at first sight seems apart from interest in mysticism is in fact another expression of it.[4]

More than a generation has now passed since the last of Rufus Jones' books appeared; over sixty years since his *Studies*, both periods in which an enormous amount has been written. His understanding and achievement therefore look very different now. It is not my purpose to criticize him for not realizing what scholars were going to discover—this

1 *Church's Debt*, 24, 12.
2 *Ibid.*, 102.
3 *Ibid.*, 45, 150.
4 *Ibid.*, 148 (on Amaury of Bêne), 218 (on Eckhart).

would be absurd—but it is important to see how his approach compares with that being made now. I shall begin by comparing his treatment of some heresies with some current views and then go on to his approach to certain mystics.

Let us begin with Pelagius, the British teacher whose ideas caused a furor in the early fifth century, provoking Augustine to clarify his ideas on key matters like the nature of grace and the effects of baptism. Pelagius attracted Rufus Jones since he seemed to him opposed to dogmas and theological systems and, contrariwise, to be a supporter of a practical, positive Christian life.[1] His famous abhorrence of Augustine's prayer in Book ten of the Confessions—"Lord, Thou hast commanded continence; give what Thou commandest and command what Thou wilt", sprang out of his conviction that man was not irredeemably corrupted by the Fall. For Pelagius sin was not inherited inescapably by all men from Adam; instead he had been endowed with powers, of reason and free will, and had been given the gift of Jesus Christ through which he could learn to live the good life. So whilst Augustine needed a Church which would dispense mysterious, magical powers to sin-scarred humanity, Pelagius looked for assistance within man himself, as well as to the creation and the whole process of revelation. The one looked for Grace "in the sphere of the natural; the other in the sphere of the supernatural".[2]

Recent work has brought out two very different sides of Pelagius: the social setting of his work and the central rôle of baptism in his theology.[3] Rufus Jones did refer to the fact that he taught whilst the barbarians pressed at the gate of the Roman world, but he did not realize that Pelagius' support came principally from a very restricted group within Roman society, a rich aristocratic group, who wished to discover a new identity for themselves. During the fourth century there had been a good deal of superficial adherence to Christian belief in this stratum of society, as well as lower down, but there were some of good education who wished to adopt a way of life which would symbolize their rejection of the old pagan *mores* which had previously guided them. To

[1] *Church's Debt*, 122–30.
[2] *Ibid.*, 127.
[3] See particularly Peter Brown, *Religion and society*, 183–226. Cf. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 1967, 227–35.

them Pelagius with his insistence that the highest ideals of Christian life should be their aim, came as an inspired teacher. Such a circle was able to respond to his call that they immerse themselves in an icy puritanism (the phrase is Peter Brown's), which previously Christians had held was only for the few.[1] Rufus Jones himself realized that this type of holiness was monastic, but he would have been startled to discover that for Pelagius the waters of baptism were an absolutely vital washing without which no man could hope to live as an authentic Christian.[2] Man could not help himself up by his boot-straps, so to speak; he could only cut himself off from his past through an initiation which had the power to wash away the encrusting rust accumulated on the personality through sin. Only after baptism and conversion could man regain innocence through the careful, regulated exercise of his life. There is no "natural" capacity to attain salvation outside the Church for Pelagius (save in the case of men who had lived long ago in a primal age of innocence). Jones' striking contrast between Pelagius and Augustine as seekers after grace in the natural and in the supernatural is no longer appropriate. There is, of course, still a very real difference between Augustine and Pelagius; for the bishop of Hippo baptism did not heal the old man, instead it put ointment on his wounds, like the Samaritan's treatment of the man he found on the way between Jerusalem and Jericho, and enabled the sufferer to look forward to "a life-time of precarious convalescence in the Inn of the Catholic Church".[3]

To turn from Pelagius to the Donatists is to stay within the world over which Augustine casts his shadow and so, perhaps, to give more coherence to this reassessment.[4] Rufus Jones rightly emphasized that what was at stake was the relationship of the Church and the world; the Donatists stood for "a Church separate from the world and untainted by its corruptions".[5] Nowadays it is realized how long and honourable was this view; its pedigree goes back through Cyprian to Tertullian and to the early Christian vision of the

1 Brown, *op. cit.*, 194.
2 *Church's Debt*, 123: he was "an eager advocate of monastic holiness".
3 Brown, *op. cit.*, 203.
4 *Church's Debt*, 164–69.
5 *Ibid.*, 164.

Church as a community called apart, out of the world.[1] Augustine, on the other hand, stood for a view that the Church was a community which had to dominate and absorb, by force if necessary, the society in which it was placed. But Rufus Jones went on to argue that because the Donatists would not accept the sacraments from men who had compromised with the State during persecution, or who lived impure lives, they emphasized "the inner spirit, the *subjective* side of religion, as against the prevailing emphasis on the *objective* side".[2] Real holiness of life was aimed at, not adherence to an objective institution, the Church, whose sacraments were channels of grace, however sinful the minister, and outside whose life there was no salvation. It comes as something of a shock, therefore, to discover that the Donatists believed that the sacraments of sinful bishops did have effects, admittedly not good ones. They held that to accept the sacraments from apostate bishops would infect the Church and *ipso facto* would debar the communicant from heaven.[3] The Donatists, therefore, are in some senses much more like Augustine than Rufus Jones realized, and we can now see as well that their stand was linked to an attempt to maintain a provincial tradition of Christianity, against an aggressive Catholic tradition.[4] Just as we now understand that Pelagius appealed to a particular social group at a crucial time, so, thanks to Professor Frend and many others, we realize that the Donatist view of the Church appealed to part of African provincial society which had genuine complaints and worries.

To the heresies of the central middle ages Rufus Jones did not devote so much space as to those active under Roman rule, and what there is lies mainly in one chapter in *The Church's debt to heretics* called "A Harvest of Sects and Schisms".[5] This begins by asking why the late eleventh and

[1] W. H. C. Frend, "Heresy and schism as social and national movements", in *Schism, heresy and religious protest*, 37–56, espec. 45; and R. A. Markus, "Christianity and dissent in Roman North Africa: changing perspectives in recent work", in the same collection, 21–36, espec. 27–28. The contrast between Pelagius and Augustine is given powerful expression by Peter Brown in *Augustine of Hippo: a biography*, 1967, 212–43. Frend's *The Donatist Church*, 1952, is the starting-point for all recent discussion.

[2] *Church's Debt*, 166.

[3] S. L. Greenslade, "Heresy and schism in the later Roman empire" in *Schism, heresy and religious protest*, 8–9.

[4] Markus, *op. cit.*, 30; and Brown, *Religion and society*, 255.

[5] *Church's Debt*, 184–215.

early twelfth centuries saw so many heresies come into existence. The answer provided is fairly brief, pointing to three aspects of the situation; the state of Western Christian society, the infiltration of ideas from outside that society, and the birth of new movements and ideas. Under the first head Rufus Jones mentioned the feeble morals of the clergy, "the crude and unspiritual state of the people in general", the lack of regular preaching and (a typical note) the "substitution of external systems and practices for inward and living experience".[1] As for external influences he mentioned the dualist ideas coming from the Balkans, and in the rest of the chapter he described a number of individuals and groups who had new ideas, ranging from Abelard to Wyclif, and even *mirabile dictu*, Joan of Arc. The problem raised by his explanation is that it does not explain why things were so bad *c.* 1100 that orthodox belief ceased to satisfy, and many were ready to turn to new ideas and movements. After all hardly any age has not complained about the quality of its clergy and the fervour of its people: Bede and the reformers of the tenth century provide evidence of this kind, and so Rufus Jones does not help us with the question why just then did so many new ideas arise and attract support.[2]

It must be admitted that so far there is no very clear consensus of view among historians such as one can find concerning heresy in the time of Augustine. With few exceptions we still have scattered articles to consider, not books, at least if we confine ourselves to works in English.[3] More and more, however, it appears to me that we are being invited to consider the effects of the transformations of European society which occurred a century earlier than Rufus Jones had looked, that is to say from *c.* 1000 onwards. Then

[1] *Ibid.*, 184.

[2] Letter of Bede to Egbert, archbishop of York (5 November 734), in C. Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae Opera historica*, I (1896), 405–23; a useful translation is in Dorothy Whitelock, *English historical documents* c. 500–1042, 1955, 735–45. The same volume contains extracts from Aelfric's Life of St. Æthelwold which illustrate the latter point, espec. 835.

[3] Again *Schism, heresy and religious protest* provides a useful entrée into recent approaches: Janet L. Nelson, "Society, theodicy and the origins of heresy: towards a reassessment of the medieval evidence", 65–77. The following paragraph is based upon her article. R. I. Moore, "The origins of medieval heresy", *History*, vol. 55, pt. 183 (1970), 21–36 is also a good introduction. J. B. Russell, *Dissent and reform in the early middle ages*, 1965, and Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the later middle ages* (2 vols, 1967), are the only two extensive books in English. The literature in European languages is vast.

occurred the break between a relatively stable, primarily agricultural, and rural society in which each man knew his place here and in the hereafter, and a society in which men moved, competed with each other, and often did not know how they fitted into this earthly scheme of things, or what place they would occupy in heavenly mansions. Admittedly we lack still a detailed explanation for how this change began, but it is very clear that by say 1100 the population of Europe was growing, and that there was movement in the countryside from settled villages to new clearings made from forest, marsh, or moor, and that others were moving towards towns. There were, therefore, growing urban populations and it seems that, to a degree, they resembled their nineteenth-century successors in being under-provided by the parish structure of the Church. Certainly we can believe that some of the displaced people of the early twelfth century were seeking for a new certainty to aid them in a situation in which old ties of kinship and lordship had no longer any meaning. Once this is appreciated it becomes possible to understand why so many heretical movements arose in towns, and why they took particularly firm hold in areas where the authority and prestige of central governments were weak—as in Lorraine, southern and eastern France and in northern Italy. This gives a whole new unifying dimension to movements which otherwise do seem quite bewildering in their diversity. But it is also interesting to realize that whereas heresy gave back to some people a sense of belonging and understanding, other people found it in the practices and beliefs of a Church which showed itself able to change very considerably in this period. The growth of a new devotion to the human Jesus, the popularity of pilgrimage, the enthusiasm for the Crusade, the enormous investment in church building, all speak of these changes. Rufus Jones inevitably focused on the heretics, but the forces of light and truth were not all on one side.

Any student of medieval mysticism has to try to come to grips with Eckhart; Rufus Jones devoted a considerable chapter to him in *Studies*, returned to him twice again before his retirement, and after that in *The Flowering*.[1] He attracted

[1] *Studies*, 217–41; *Flowering*, 61–85. There are also chapters in *At one with the Infinite*, 1921, and *Some exponents of mystical religion*, 1930, 77–113.

Rufus Jones because of his teaching that in this life the soul could attain to a share in the beatific vision through the process which Eckhart called "the birth of the Son in a loving soul".[1] Eckhart's mysticism seemed to Rufus Jones to have a calm and depth which was refreshingly free of the emotionalism of much contemporary mysticism which spoke in the imagery of the Bride and Groom in the Song of Songs.[2] On the other hand he recognized that the unique contribution of Eckhart was the way he spoke about his own experience in a manner and language which got across to "great popular audiences of lay people".[3] But this is not to suggest that Rufus Jones considered that the fourteenth century scholar was a Proto-Protestant, he realized that Eckhart was "essentially loyal to the faith and to the Church and to his order".[4]

Although the chapter on Eckhart in *The Flowering* is written with enthusiasm and clarity, it cannot now be taken as a very safe guide, since Rufus Jones avoided the problem of authenticity.[5] He knew that there was a problem, but when he wrote, the task of producing critical editions of Eckhart's Latin and German works had been barely begun. For our present purpose it is sufficient to note that, according to a recent estimate, of one hundred and eleven vernacular sermons printed by Pfeiffer in 1857, only thirty-three can be accepted without question as genuine.[6] Rufus Jones quoted often from the dubious ones, and depended for his version on Miss C. de B. Evans' English version published in 1924 and 1931, which has some serious defects.[7] It was reliance upon dubious works which led Rufus Jones to say, for example, that Eckhart valued the life of Martha, the life of activity, higher than that of Mary, the life of contemplation.[8] Recent scholarship has also made abundantly clear that the difficult concepts of the "Fünklein", the "Etwas" in the soul, or of *Abgeschiedenheit*, detachment, which are both so central to his mystical system are intimately connected with his theology, which grows out of the scholastic background of

1 *Flowering*, 78.
2 *Ibid.*, 80.
3 *Ibid.*, 69–70.
4 *Ibid.*, 64.
5 *Ibid.*, 71.
6 James M. Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, 1957, 115.
7 *Ibid.*, 124.
8 *Ibid.*, 80; *Flowering*, 83–84.

his day.[1] All this is not, however, to deny that by expressing himself so often in speech which laymen, and laywomen, could understand, Eckhart did have enormous influence on succeeding generations.[2]

Rufus Jones felt sure that Eckhart was the "Father" of the movement which had the name "Friends of God" which *The Flowering* was written to portray.[3] There does not now seem much ground for talking of a movement, if by this is meant an organized group, although it is true that the followers of Tauler and Suso (who were each undoubtedly influenced by Eckhart) did sometimes call themselves friends of God.[4] The name itself has good Biblical precedent in the Book of Wisdom (chapter vii, 27), and there is no ground for believing Eckhart used the phrase in any technical sense. To the actual founder of the community in the ruined abbey of Grüner Wörth near Strasbourg, Rulman Merswin (d. 1382), time has not been kind since Rufus Jones wrote of him. I think, reading between the lines, one may feel that in the late 30s Rufus Jones himself did not have as high an opinion of him as he did in the 1900s; at that earlier stage the degree to which the works preserved under Merswin's name were compilations with little original in them, was not so clear to him as it became. Nonetheless he still wrote that for an untaught man the ex-Strasbourg merchant showed "considerable skill in adopting anonymous writings to his purpose"; whereas one recent critic has called him a plagiarist of "mediocre ability".[5] Certainly in comparison with Tauler or Suso the writings associated with Merswin and his circle seem pressed from a very different vintage.

But why, one may ask, was Germany such a centre for the search for mystical experience in the fourteenth century? To answer this question Rufus Jones pointed to the effects of civil war, of schism in the Empire, of the "captivity" of the Papacy in Avignon, and of a series of natural disasters, culminating in the Black Death.[6] In short he seems to have

[1] Leff, *Heresy*, 262–94, as well as Clark, *op. cit.*, 26–81, 82–98 both make this abundantly clear. Cf. also Clark [*The Great*] *German mystics*, 1959, 7–35, and François Vandenbroucke in J. Leclercq *et al.*, *La Spiritualité du moyen âge*, 1961, 454–65.

[2] A point well made by R. W. Southern, *Medieval humanism and other studies*, 1970, 19–26.

[3] *Flowering*, 61.

[4] Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, 122–24.

[5] *Flowering*, 137; Clark, *German mystics*, 81.

[6] *Flowering*, 21–22.

believed that the desire to cultivate the interior garden of the soul was developed by the unattractiveness of the exterior field of the world. There may be something in this hypothesis, but it should be noticed that Eckhart's life—*c.* 1260–1327—falls before most of the external troubles mentioned. It therefore seems right to give weight to the fact that Eckhart, and many of those who came after him, were Friars who had as part of their duties, to provide teaching for religious communities of women.[1] Whilst Eckhart was in Strasbourg, *c.* 1314–*c.* 1319, he preached to nuns, as well as to lay people, and Tauler's sermons are good examples of the mystical teaching which he gave to nuns. The growth of a great mystical tradition in Germany should therefore be connected with the work of teachers who had been trained in the universities of their day and who simplified their theology to suit their audiences. But it is also important to ask how this mystical teaching met the needs of its audience. Here I think we can suggest that it gave religious communities, and to some degree laymen, a sense of reality, of belonging, in a world which often appeared hostile. These communities, like the lay audiences, were generally situated in the crowded cities, where men and women so often felt themselves adrift. Some "ran out", to use a seventeenth century term, into heresy, others found a home in a mysticism, which whilst formally orthodox, in the sense that it took the creeds and the sacraments for granted, gave the individual a sense of his worth.[2] If this approach has value it is worth underlining that it complements Rufus Jones' suggestions rather than excludes them, since once the turn within had begun, outward disturbance and discord reinforced it.

So far I have, perhaps rashly, not asked what Rufus Jones understood by mysticism, although I have moved on the edge of this question.[3] Now I can no longer avoid it and the best place to start is the definition which he put forward in his first considerable book, *Studies* in 1909. There he wrote that mystical religion is the "type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine presence. It

[1] Clark, *German mystics*, 1–6; Vandenbroucke, *La Spiritualité*, 448–54.

[2] The heresy of the Free Spirit gained many adherents, cf. Leff, *Heresy*, 308–407.

[3] Vining, 252–65 has a very useful and clear chapter.

is religion in its most acute, intense, and living stage."[1] Thirty years later he was saying much the same in *The Flowering*; "Mysticism, that is to say the attitude of mind which comes into correspondence with a spiritual world-order that is felt to be as real as the visible one, is not confined to any race or any specific longitudes or latitudes".[2] We may note one thing about both these formulations at once; they emphasize feeling rather than belief. Observe the words "immediate awareness", "direct and intimate consciousness", or "that is felt to be". For Rufus Jones mysticism is a description for something sensed in the emotions. Not everyone has defined it this way. Lalande, for example, wrote that it was a "belief in the possibility of an intimate and direct union of the human spirit with the fundamental principle of being, a union which constitutes at once a mode of existence and a mode of knowledge different from and superior to normal existence and knowledge".[3] Here is a definition which, besides including non-theistic systems, lays its emphasis on something which occurs and is known, rather than felt. Admittedly the relationship between knowledge and sensation is a subtle one, but I would suggest that Rufus Jones stressed the primacy of feeling.

Now this emphasis affected the way that he described the words used by particular mystics, either in teaching others, or in explaining to others what they had themselves experienced, or what they hoped to experience. Eckhart, for example, is generally considered to have been directing his hearers towards a state of being, a mode of existence, or *Wesenmystik* as German scholars call it, *not* an experience involving the emotions of love, hope, fear and so on.[4] He was, indeed, reacting against the school of affective mysticism which had dominated western Europe from the late eleventh century of which John of Fécamp, Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure the Franciscan are perhaps the most notable exponents.[5] Rufus Jones' approach made it hard for him to see this side of Eckhart.

On the other hand, just because he laid emphasis on feeling

1 *Studies*, xv.
2 *Flowering*, 210.
3 *Vocabulaire de la philosophie*, 5th edition (1947), 644, quoted by E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an age of anxiety*, 1965, 70.
4 Leff, *Heresy*, 280; Vandenbroucke, *La Spiritualité*, 460–61.
5 Leclercq and Vandenbroucke in *La Spiritialité*, 161–447.

he was particularly keen to guard mysticism against identification with peculiar and sometimes pathological states. Here we can see the influence of the psychology of his day; he wished to establish the healthiness, normality and soundness of mysticism.[1] For this reason he took pains to try and draw a line between where, say, the ascetic practices recommended by Tauler seemed wholesome and where they reflected something disordered in his personality.[2] And he sought to test the value of the experience which an individual claimed to have had by the effects it had on his personality and behaviour.[3] This approach led him to call St. Francis's experience of the stigmata "a point of weakness rather than a point of strength"; a remark which quite inadvertently gave deep offence.[4] It was partly because of this distrust of the abnormal that Rufus Jones came to deplore those mystical writers who placed ecstasy at the summit of the individual's search for God. Such an emphasis upon the loss of self-consciousness, which he derived quite rightly from Neo-Platonism, seemed to him "an unfortunate and very costly contribution and quite foreign to the mysticism of the New Testament".[5] Yet it should be realized that this strand in Western, and Eastern, Christian mysticism is a very strong one, so much so that some writers about mysticism would restrict the use of the term to views which do lead the individual upwards to a loss of individuality and a feeling of union with something other.[6]

But if we return to Rufus Jones' definition again we also find that he never succeeded in differentiating the experience he described from what might be called the religious experience of the normal believer, or from the experience of the prophet.[7] Far be it from me, a mere historian, to attempt to draw these lines, but it seems to me that the current Quaker discussion on prophetism and mysticism needs to explore this ground much more closely than it has done so far. For my own part, I am impressed by the way that continental scholars have transcended this difficulty by

1 *Studies*, xvii–xviii, xxvii–xxix.
2 *Studies*, 284, 290–91; cf. *Flowering*, 148.
3 *Studies*, xxx–xxxi.
4 *Ibid.*, 165; Vining, 127–28.
5 *Flowering*, 5–6.
6 Cf. David Knowles, *The English mystical tradition*, 1961, 1–20.
7 Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, 70 note.

talking about the history of spirituality—an approach which enables the rather unusual reports of, say, Eckhart to be set against the evidence that survives of what the "ordinary man in the pew felt", if one may use a phrase anachronistic to the pre-pew era.[1] It is when this approach is used that it is possible to take account of the influence of habit, institutions and thought-systems on the way that individuals describe their experience. Rufus Jones, on the other hand, seems to have felt that there was a discontinuity between what happened inside a person, so to speak, and what happened to their bodies.

There are extremely subtle problems here but it seems to me that the whole experience of an individual needs taking seriously, and that we separate inward and outward at the cost of understanding less fully. May I illustrate this suggestion in four ways.

In the first place we have to recognize that the individual uses certain words to express certain experiences very largely because his nurture has accustomed him to do this. Home, school, work place, worshipping community, all contribute to this. Social groupings help to pattern our ways of thinking. It is unsafe, therefore, to isolate the individual from his society and to say, for example, that Augustine's doctrine of grace "is not the fruit of personal experience, it is rather a product of historical influence and of logic".[2]

Secondly, it seems to me unwise to draw a firm line between the institutional forms of corporate religious life and the religious experience of individuals, or of groups belonging to those bodies. No corporate, continuous body can exist without organization, and the forms this takes influence the experience of individuals. In his own life Rufus Jones acted on this understanding: he worked, no one harder, for the drawing together of the pieces of American Quakerism, sundered by theological discord in the nineteenth century. First he played a large part in the foundation of the Five Years Meeting and then of the American Friends Service Committee. But if he saw the need for a united discipline, a form of life and organization for American Quakerism, in

[1] The oft-cited book by Leclercq, Vandenbroucke and Bouyer is a good example of this approach. R. W. Southern's *Western society* also shows what happens if an individual's insights are put in their setting, e.g. St. Francis, 281–83.

[2] *Studies*, 96.

his historical work again and again he deplored the development of organization. Of the Early Church contrasted with the Church of the sub-apostolic age he wrote that "It was a spiritual fellowship . . . an organic body held together by a common experience and by internal forces of life. It was guided by gifted persons rather than by technical officials"; whereas of the Church in the time of Gregory VII he said that it had substituted "external systems and practices for inward and living experience".[1] I do not think it unfair to comment that as a member of a relatively small religious body within whose supporting institutions most of his early life occurred, he was not well equipped by experience to appreciate the problems of scale involved in organizing the church in either the second, or eleventh centuries.[2] A hostile world, strong alien ideas, poor communications (compared with nowadays), a low level of literacy and fairly few books, all presented the earlier Christians with very real problems, totally unlike those of New England in the 1900s. Europe around 1100 did not have many familiar landmarks either.

In the third place, I do not think we can delimit the external acts in which worship is expressed from the inward effects they may have on individuals. Just as the form of a Quaker meeting for worship is a part of the whole spirituality of Quakerism, it embodies beliefs about reality and affects our reaction to experience, so sacramental worship expresses beliefs and shapes the experience of those who share it.[3] It was unawareness of this which led Rufus Jones to a curious comment on the *Imitation of Christ*, which he said "took men away from creeds and systems to the eternal idea of Christianity, . . . [ministering] to an inward, first-hand spiritual life".[4]

[1] *New Studies*, 139; *Church's debt*, 184.

[2] The discussion about the earlier problem in *Studies*, 28–9 is notably inadequate.

[3] A sensitive discussion of how the design of church buildings reflects changing beliefs about the presence of saints and the eucharist is C. N. L. Brooke's "Religious sentiment and church design in the later middle ages", *Medieval church and society*, 1971, 162–82. A Quaker parallel exists in the way that the design of meeting houses reflects changing ideas about ministry and the position of recorded ministers and elders.

[4] *Studies*, 323. In *Flowering*, 238–44, Rufus Jones accepted the then prevalent view that a large part of the *Imitation* was by Gerard Groote. The traditional view has been re-established by the discovery of the autograph manuscript; L. M. J. Delaissé, *Le Manuscrit autographe de Thomas à Kempis*, 2 vols., 1956. See also J. Huijben and P. Debongnie, *L'Auteur ou les auteurs de "L'Imitation"*, 1957.

One who turns from this to Thomas à Kempis' book will be surprised to find the large amount of space devoted to the eucharist.[1]

Lastly, I doubt whether it is possible to draw a frontier between thinking about experience and experience itself, or in religious terms, between theology and disclosure or revelation. We may regret the influence of certain types of thought, but talking about God, theology, and talking with Him are not completely separable activities. It is, I think, futile therefore to say that the Logos idea "carried along with it a separation between scholars and lay-Christians, logic-men and plain disciples",[2] since over the centuries the words used by even the plainest men in prayer or worship have sometimes, at not many removes, reflected theologians' formulae.[3]

Rufus Jones worked as a historian of medieval mysticism and heresy somewhat apart and his work inevitably appears now to be very much the product of his age and upbringing.[4] But if I have, inevitably in an address to this association, spoken so far *more historico*, as an historian, this does not mean that I do not value, and to my lesser capacity share in, his major concern, that men and women should seek a more vital, transforming knowledge of God. I am sure this is a living task, to which Rufus Jones made in his day an enormous contribution—so many lives were deepened by him—yet now we need a wider understanding of those forces and institutions which mould experience if we are to pursue it.

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[1] i.e. the whole of the fourth and last part.

[2] *Church's debt*, 67.

[3] This could be illustrated by the absorption of, for example, poems like *Jesu Dulcis Memoria* by an anonymous XII c. Cistercian into the prayer-life of Europe: cf. A. Wilmart, *Le "Jubilus" dit de Saint Bernard*, 1944.

[4] It is significant that no reviews of his major works in the field being considered appeared in the American periodicals *Speculum* and *Traditio* devoted to the period, nor in the *American historical review*, the *Journal of theological studies*, nor major historical journals on this side of the Atlantic.