



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2017; 3(7): 1489-1491
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 07-05-2017
Accepted: 16-06-2017

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M. K. Gandhi: Stanley Jones and the naturalization of Christianity

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Abstract

Man is a social animal and his behavioral characteristics are not confined to different regions but are universal. Being human means that man is influenced by greed, materialism and even moral failure. Very few missionaries understood the failings of man and addressed this aspect of the frailty of human nature. Reverend Eli Stanley Jones was one missionary who portray his incredible understanding of the spiritual, emotional and moral yearnings of humanity in general. He accepted and warmly welcomed all people from different faiths into his fold. His personality and works are a shining example of what he believed. He has written several books that take the reader to a higher level of understanding. He was inspired by Gandhian way of life and was even called pro-Indian by the British government. This paper portrays his life, his works and his concepts which were exhibited through his works.

Keywords: Methodist, evangelist, round table conference, ashram

Introduction

Eli Stanley Jones was born on January 3rd, 1884 in Clarksville, Maryland. He grew upon a farm and later on moved to Baltimore. He studied at Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky and spent his summers as a student evangelist. At the age of 17, he was deeply touched by the ministry of evangelist Robert J. Bateman and his life was transformed from that day (Eddy 1945: 271) ^[1]. Initially he wanted to study law but after his meeting with evangelist Bateman, he became a student volunteer at Asbury and soon began teaching at Asbury College.

While teaching at Asbury College, the Methodist Mission Board asked Stanley Jones if he would go to India. He prayed for God's direction and believed that he had heard the Inner Voice guiding him to India. In 1907, Jones came to India under the Methodist Board and assumed the pastoral duties at the Lal Bagh Methodist Church, Lucknow, where for three years he was the pastor. To enable himself to He studied Urdu and Hindi so that he could converse with the converted Christians. In 1910, he was transferred to Sitapur to work among several hundred Indian workers and several thousand Christians. Here he preached chiefly to the lower castes, for very few of the high castes would consider leaving all or losing all, to follow Christ (Eddy 1945: 272) ^[1].

After nearly eight and a half years of strenuous work, Stanley Jones suffered a nervous breakdown and went to America on a year's furlough. He returned to India but without fully recovering his health. He asked the Board to assign him to special work among the educated classes. He was supported by Frank Mason North and the Board, which left him free to use his special gifts for the good of the people. For the next twenty-three years, Dr. Jones worked for the educated classes in India. In 1928, he was elected as a Methodist bishop but he 'wisely' resigned to his divine calling of reaching educated people in many lands (Eddy 1945: 273) ^[1].

With his appointment as 'Conference Evangelist' at Sitapur headquarters in 1917, he launched into a field which was to take over his entire life that of an Evangelist (Hollister 1956: 261) ^[5]. The appointment varied from "Evangelist to Educated Indians", 1926; "Evangelist at Large", 1946; to "General Evangelist", 1950 (Jones 1931: 13) ^[3]. Though he was retired at the Methodist Conference of 1954, he continued to live as an Evangelist, until his death.

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Whether it was India, Burma, Ceylon or Singapore, Dr. Stanley Jones was equally effective as an evangelist, welcomed by students, professionals, government officials and all other classes who spoke in English. He left his meetings open to questions and usually had round-table groups in which issues were discussed freely. He looked upon the entire world as his parish and preached the gospel over the length and breadth of India for several decades, four times in China and the Philippines, six or more times in Malaya, once in South Africa Kenya and the United States and several times in Mexico (Eddy 1945: 275) ^[1]. He regarded the United States as one of the greatest and most needed mission fields in the world. In America, he participated in the Preaching Mission in 1936, the University Mission in 1938 and in the Christian Mission in 1940-1941. He also conducted several "one-man missions under the sponsorship of the Department of Evangelism of the Federal Council of Churches." (Eddy 1945: 275) ^[1]. He had a "way with words" and his first book, *The Christ of the Indian Road* was published in twelve languages. *Christ At The Round Table* (1928) has been the most communicative treatise of the age, upholding respectful and congenial communication and impressing all its readers (Matthews 2003: 3) ^[6]. *Abundant Living* (1942) has sold over four hundred thousand copies and has been translated into Spanish, Chinese and transcribed in Braille. Apart from these well-known books, he has over thirty-three books to his credit and each has been a bestseller.

The Concepts of Dr. Stanley Jones

Dr. Stanley Jones' books exhibit his incredible understanding of the spiritual, emotional and moral yearnings of humanity at large. He was acutely aware of the fact that man's problems are not eastern or western problems but just human. Human need and human sin are not geographical (Jones 1928:14) ^[2]. Neither is materialism, greed, moral failure and spiritual yearning confined only to the East or the West. It is found wherever man is found. While some of the books provide the readers with a higher level of spirituality, e.g., *The Christ of the Mount*, others bring the readers closer to God through their devotional doctrines. Stanley Jones was aware of the changing attitude of the people towards foreign cultures and religions, from one of un-sympathy and contempt to that of appreciation and sympathy.

He is the only evangelist to have hosted Round Table Conferences at his Sat Tal Ashram, where individuals regardless of their religious commitments were free to come and openly talk about their spiritual and moral dilemmas, and find a solution for the same. He was of the firm conviction that the greatest need of modern Christianity was the rediscovery of the Sermon on the Mount as the only practical way to live (Jones 1931:13) ^[3]. He even asked Mahatma Gandhi about what could be done to 'naturalise' Christianity so that it would cease to be a foreign thing. Gandhi replied, keeping in mind the Sermon on the Mount, that the Christians must practice their religion without adulteration or toning it down (Jones 1931:16) ^[3].

Dr. Stanley Jones stayed with Mahatma Gandhi at his Ashram in Sabarmati in 1927, and, considered Gandhiji's actions to have shed more light on the cross than any Christian could have in history (Jones 1928: 65) ^[2]. Stanley Jones advocated that when constitutional means were not open to the public, the three ways in which they may take to

gaining righteous ends apart from war were 'Passive Resistance, Civil Disobedience and the Method of Jesus' (Jones 1928:155) ^[2]. Dr. Stanley Jones found it ironical that, a Christian Government had sent 'Hindu and Moslem' agents to find out if his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount was seditious in nature (Jones 1928:16) ^[2].

Dr. Stanley Jones is credited with the founding of the Ashram at Sat Tal (Nainital) in 1930, which was a meeting ground or both Christians, Non-Christian Indians and foreigners. It provided a basis on which the East and West could get along together under changing circumstances. The spirit of the Ashram can be gathered from the motto on the wall of the meeting room:

'Leave behind all race and class distinction ye that enter here.'

Another motto says that:

'Here we enter fellowship; Sometimes we will agree to differ; always we will resolve to love, and unite to serve.'

(Jones 1939:189) ^[4] Non-Christians were welcome to participate in the meetings and devotions as far as they could, without any compulsions. All members at the Ashram laid aside all titles and were referred to by their first name with 'Brother' or 'Sister' attached to it. It was customary to wear Indian clothes and have meals seated cross-legged on the floor. Wearing Indian clothes like the dhoti and kurta provided a real renunciation, as it made the foreigner take his stand with those who were dominated by the foreigners (Jones 1939:193) ^[4]. Adorning homespun Khaddar cloth, made them politically suspect as well. Dr. Jones was sympathetic towards India's national aspirations.

He had stayed with Mahatma Gandhi, attended the National Congress and received questions during the Question Hour in his public meetings (Jones 1939:197) ^[4]. A custom that Dr. Stanley Jones and other members learnt from Mahatma Gandhi was to observe one day of complete silence. On another day, the servants were given leave and the Ashram members volunteered to fill in their places. The Ashram at Sat Tal was different from the other Ashrams as married people were and are still allowed unlike in other Christian Ashrams. The Ashram, which was built as a summer of its own, is managed by the Executive Board of the Methodist resort by a British engineer, spreads over 400 acres with a lake Church and is an inter-denominational Ashram. During the World War II, he extended the Ashram Movement to the United States and other parts of the world.

The other institution, which Dr. Stanley Jones established was the Nur Manzil Psychiatric Centre in 1950, at Lucknow, which was also the "first of its kind for India" (Hollister 1956:271) ^[5]. His love for the Indian people and culture is evident from his contribution through the Ashram and the Nur Manzil. He was declared pro-Indian and anti-British and on several occasions his entry into India was banned (Matthew 2003:34) ^[6]. Dr. Jones died on January 23rd, 1973 at Clara Swain Hospital in Bareilly leaving behind a legacy of inspiration, dedication, commitment, zeal, and an ever-flowing fountain of encouragement in facing the challenges of the era.

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