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The Wesleyan Paradigm and the Kaleidoscope within: The Scholarship of Charles Edwin Jones

by Steven D. Cooley
University of Dayton

Charles Edwin Jones has been a leading participant in a generation of historians seeking to introduce Wesleyan Holiness studies to scholarly consideration and to interpret that tradition to itself. While raising the scholarly level of this discussion, Jones and his colleagues have remained self-consciously animated by questions arising from the subjective core of their locations within this religious tradition. As Jones himself has written, "Most social commentary is in one way or another biographical."

Charles was born to Dove and Dess Jones who had migrated from Arkansas to Kansas City, Mo., in early 1924, the peak decade of rural migration into the cities. There Dess began forty years as a street care operator for the city and joined the labor union. The family's rural Baptist and Methodist roots were not easily transplanted to the larger urban churches, but the Jones' found community with other rural emigrants in the Church of God (Holiness), before moving to the slightly more upscale Church of the Nazarene. Both were then disparagingly labeled as "holy roller" churches due to their emotionally demonstrative worship where shouting, weeping, waving of handkerchiefs and aisle running were not unknown. The Nazarene congregation prospered with the establishment of the denomination's headquarters in Kansas City. This institutional world, however, contrasted to that of the congregation's working laity who daily interacted with the world outside the denomination. This lay working class experience of the Nazarene headquarters church has contributed to Jones's distinctive historical priorities.

In 1954, Charles completed a history degree at Peniel-Bethany College in Bethany, Okla., which published his Roaring Creek. These established orphanages, schools, and rescue missions rather than churches. Women preachers traveled the circuits, received ordination, and served as head administrators. Worship was noisy and emotional, while personal behavior was firmly restricted. At the furthest fringe, extremists rejected sacraments, advocated marital purity, and questioned the spiritual validity of modern medicine and excessive bathing. Holiness theology received quick treatment, and future institutional leaders appeared without the later dignities of office or maturity.

This is history from the bottom up, giving a sympathetic hearing to the democratized Christianity of the white "nirrtraff" and their concerns for piety and practical action. What has been called the kaleidoscopic "Holiness model" of evangelical history is already apparent in the interpretations of Jones's student paper. While arising from his personal experience of the tradition, these priorities were also cultivated by the Oklahoma New Deal progressivism of his teacher, Fred Floyd, and further supported by the official Nazarene history at that time by M.E. Redford.

Redford regarded era's noisy emotional worship and strict behavioral codes as equally essential as the tradition's theological and institutional identity. Jones's continuation of these earlier official priorities has set his work apart from the tradition's current self-understanding, which has presented itself since the 1950s as essentially an intellectual tradition. Jones's priorities for ritual, behavior, and experience have been a counterpoint to these studies, and have assisted in maintaining something of Redford's earlier balance within the larger conversation overall.

In 1955, Jones completed a master's degree in library science at the University of Michigan. This led to positions as librarian for Park College, curator of manuscripts for the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan, and as cataloger for history at Brown University. This experience as librarian and archivist contributed to Jones's extensive bibliographic publications and to his support of the Nazarene Archives in Kansas City and of the Wesleyan-Holiness Studies Center.
Recent Articles on Wesleyan/Holiness Theme


Dissertations on Wesleyan/Holiness Themes


THE WESLEYAN HOLINESS STUDIES CENTER BULLETIN

Bill Faupel
Editor
William Kostlevy
Associate Editor
Books on Wesleyan/Holiness Themes


The Wesleyan Paradigm

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Center in Wilmore, Ky.

Jones completed a 1968 doctorate in American history under Merle Curti at the University of Wisconsin. Curti, a distinguished intellectual historian and student of Frederick Jackson Turner, introduced Jones to the Wisconsin emphasis on the role of environment and region in the formation of identity. The publication of his dissertation in 1974, "Perfectionist Persuasion," continued the earlier interests but employed methods then prominent in popular and social history. He compared statistical data in a demographic study of growth and geographic distribution. He reached for a comprehensive geographic sweep of the continent, emphasizing the populist middle regions of the Holiness Movement. He approached the topic through the sociology of religion, being particularly sensitive to the affects on spirituality from urban migration, social location, and institutional forms. And he turned attention to popular thought as approached through the study of metaphor. Rather than discussing formal theology, Jones focused on the Exodus narratives and the metaphors of Canaan as they appeared in song, sermon, and testimony. The turn to metaphor is undoubtedly the most widely discussed contribution of the dissertation. No less significant, was Jones's reach for a more complex analysis of religion. Holiness religiousness was seen as the conjunction of ritual, life style, and theology interacting with its institutional formations and personal religious experience. For Jones, however, the center remains ritual and experience.

This has resulted in a distinctive body of work seeking to interpret the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition to itself and to introduce that tradition to its own "dynamic kaleidoscope," mixing lay and clergy, folk, popular, and high culture, Pentecostals and Wesleyans, African Americans and whites. They present a view of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition authentic in the religious strivings of the common folk and resists the tradition's pursuit of a place in the mainstream by attending to its religious outsiders who challenged the arrogance of that mainstream. Thus, his painstaking efforts to identify the historical record of these small obscure groups and the affect of Holiness outsiders in shaping America's pluralist religious culture.

Elements of Jones's earlier work have been developed further in a number of articles. His examination of Kansas City's Holiness churches is an unparalleled case study that analyzes demographic and occupational data for two Holiness congregations (1972). Our literature is weaker for not continuing such sociological studies. In "The Railroad to Heaven" (1972), Jones revisited metaphor and its implications for the history of spirituality. The effect of mass transportation on the traditional Bunyanesque pilgrimage literature is examined in a mix of sources ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story to the camp-meeting spirituals. The conversation he constructed here between the Holiness Movement and the high culture in the arena of literature deserves further exploration. His interest in metaphor has recently compared the Canaan experience of the Holiness Movement with the upper room experience of Pentecostalism (1994, 1995, 1997).

THE JONES BIBLIOGRAPHIES SUBTLY, BUT FIRMLY, CHALLENGE THE ELITE CENTER OF THE AMERICAN HOLINESS TRADITION...

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The central concern of all Jones's work has been the classical issue of charisma and institutionalization as formulated by Weber, Troeltsch, and Niebuhr.

For Jones, the transition to denominationalism raises the issue of spiritual decline.

If Jones has contributed a useful counterpoint to the dominant modes of Wesleyan/Holiness history, perhaps we should begin considering how to affirm the insights of both approaches in some larger synthesis. First, rather than choosing between intellectual history and social history, a social history of Wesleyan theology should be undertaken to examine the interaction of theology with the tradition's changing social locations. Second, to integrate Jones's emphasis on ritual and experience with that of the intellectual histories, we must raise our analysis of ritual and experience to the level of the intellectual histories. The tools for this are waiting in the social sciences and humanities, but their careful application has hardly begun.

Lastly, by tracing the decline of primitive charisma in the relentless process of institutionalization, Jones employs one of the classic story patterns of American religious studies. This is clearly among the most dominant interpretive paradigms of Methodist history. It is worth questioning. Does not Methodism actually embrace both charisma and institutionalization in ways not quite comprehensible to the sectarian cycle? Rather than decline, are we missing the competition between different centers of charisma, or might charisma not be disappearing but simply relocating or metamorphosing into other forms? Tricky stuff, charisma, eluding the wineskins of our narrative priorities and difficult to keep in the webs of our analysis. At the least, narratives of decline allow little possibility for the tolerance of new social realities nor for guidance among those realities.

For Jones, the transition to denominationalism raises the issue of spiritual decline.

If most social commentary is indeed biographical, then new biographies may be expected to produce fresh commentaries on the Wesleyan/Holiness experience. Yet, while animated by questions arising from new social realities, these new commentaries must also receive cultivation from their teachers and support from the commentary they received. Charles Edwin Jones has provided us with both in assuring the lively continuation of Wesleyan studies as that tradition has sought to understand itself and to enter into the academic conversation of American religious history. He has given us much to think about, and that is as high an achievement as any scholar might attain.

Charles Edwin Jones
Select Bibliography

1953


1954


1955

Index for The Other Sheep (1913-1918), 1955 manuscript, Kansas City, Miss.; Nazarene Archives, xi, 186 pages.

1960


1964


1968


1969


1970


1972


1973

1974


1976

1978

1979

1980


1983


1985


1987


1988

1989

1990


1991
"Barnwell, Marcus L. and Margarette W." and "Jones, William Nelson and Frances Belle Whitham" History of Benton County, Arkansas (Rogers, Ark.: Benton County Heritage Committee, 1991)

1994


1995


Notes
1. Perfectionist Persuasion, xiii.

Wesleyan/ Holiness Books
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Sources for Classic Wesleyan/Holiness Titles

**Microform**

American Theological Library Association Preservation Programs 820 Church Street, Suite 300 Evanston, IL 60201

Preservation quality microforms includes important Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal and Evangelical periodicals.

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Schmul Publishing Co., Inc. P.O. Box 716 Salem, OH 44460-0716 (800) 772-6657 Reprints classic works of Wesley and Holiness Movement titles. Membership in the Schmul Wesleyan Book Club costs only $5.00.

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Bethany House 6820 Auto Club Road Minneapolis, MN 55438 Considerable materials on Charles G. Finney.

Evangelist of Truth, Inc. P.O. Box 22309 Knoxville, TN 37933 In the finest tradition of Holiness publishing, inexpensive paper­back reprints of writers such as E.E. Shelhamer, Bud Robinson, H.C. Morrison, etc.

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Reformation Publishers Springfield Pastor’s School 3705 Middle Urbana Road Springfield, OH 45502 (513) 390­7700 Inexpensive Church of God (Anderson) reprints. Many are photocopy reproductions.

Fundamental Wesleyan Publishers P.O. Box 3432 Beckley, WV 24801 Limited reprints.

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