

THE CHRIST OF THE
AMERICAN ROAD

To Sister Ada,

Your Friend

Stanley Jones
"Br. Stanley"

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The Christ of the American Road

E. STANLEY JONES



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THE CHRIST OF THE AMERICAN ROAD

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
I. WE HAVE A STARTING POINT	17
II. TWO LINES CONVERGE IN HISTORY	27
III. WHAT AND WHERE IS AMERICA?	50
IV. THE SEVEN HESITATIONS OF DEMOCRACY	66
V. THE SEVEN HESITATIONS OF AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY	90
VI. THE CENTRAL GENIUS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY	104
VII. THE THREEFOLD GENIUS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH	112
VIII. THE APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF THE NEW MAN OUT OF BOTH PARTIES	123
IX. THE PRINCIPLE OF THE NEW MAN APPLIED TO AMERICAN LIFE	132
X. FURTHER APPLICATIONS OF THE PRINCIPLE	144

XI. THE NEW MAN OUT OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION	155
XII. BRIDGING THE GAPS	163
XIII. THE GAP BETWEEN OUR FAITH AND OUR GOVERNMENT	181
XIV. FEDERAL UNION OF THE CHURCHES AND OF THE NATIONS	190
XV. THE EMERGING AMERICAN INTERPRETATION	201
XVI. WHAT OF THE FUTURE?	237

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INTRODUCTION

AFTER TWENTY YEARS in India I wrote *The Christ of the Indian Road*. I gave the manuscript to the publisher with an apology and went back to India. I expected nothing from it. Its reception was a surprise to me. When I look back to see the reason for that reception, I think perhaps it was this: it was new to a good many people to find that each nation has something distinctive to contribute to the interpretation of the universal Christ. Seeing Christ in the light of one national interpretation—their own—they took it for granted that this was *the* interpretation, the Truth itself. They were surprised to find that other peoples, with a different racial history and culture, might bring out other phases and emphases of the universal Christ which they had missed. But to some of us who have roamed afar it has become a commonplace that it will take the sons of men to interpret the Son of Man.

For none of us has the Truth. The Truth is in Christ—the Truth. What we hold is truths about the Truth. We need, therefore, the other person's truth to add to our truths, so that our pooled truths may more closely approximate him who is the Truth. I say "more closely approximate," for even our pooled truths are forever this side of the Truth. We shall eternally grow into deeper and larger comprehension of the Truth, and assimilate it more and

The Christ of the American Road

more into character and achievement; that will be our happiness and our heaven.

Each individual and each nation has something distinctive to contribute to the fuller interpretation of the Christ. Just as Paul could say "my gospel"—for it was a gospel that had gone through the cultural history and personality of Paul and was colored by that fact—so each nation has a unique past, and therefore a unique personality, and through that unique personality can give a unique interpretation of Christ. While keeping itself open to other interpretations, and thus taking their corrections, nevertheless each nation must dare be itself, must dare believe that it has a call and a commission to offer humbly to the rest its own interpretation of the Universal Fact. Just as each individual must allow the Spirit of God to pull out the stops and play all over the keyboard of his life, so each nation must present itself to God to be played over so that its notes, definite and distinctive, may be a part of the universal harmony.

When God makes the individual, he breaks the pattern. That individual is one with the rest of humanity, and yet he is sole, unique, different. Through that individual God would open a fresh book of revelation. For that individual can give an interpretation of the manifold God which no one else can give. Through the nation, too, God is desiring to open a fresh book of revelation. The nation may not respond, and that book of revelation may be forever closed and sealed, and because of it the human race will be forever the poorer.

The son of the great Emerson said: "My father picked up many things, not necessarily new, but he colored them."

Introduction

We Americans have picked up many things from all the world, but we have colored them; they are now American. A thoughtful Englishman once said, "I trust I am a Christian Englishman, but I know that I am also an English Christian, and my life has been molded partly by the Christian faith and partly by contemporaneous English society." The same with us. We are Americans, and our lives have been molded partly by the New Testament and partly by American history and culture. That history and culture are unique. Through them God intends to offer a unique offering to the world. That should not make us proud. It should humble us to believe that we can be the instruments of a purpose beyond ourselves, and that a divine purpose. We are a people of destiny. But so are all people. We should take what they have to offer, and then humbly present our own offering.

In many parts of our country the English walnut is grafted on the stump of the American black walnut. The black walnut is indigenous, and for this reason has power to resist local disease and climate. So Christianity is grafted on the root of our American culture and history. That makes our contribution unique.

What that particular offering is, which America has to offer, will be the theme of this book.

I may not have grasped that peculiar contribution of America, but at least I have had a unique opportunity for doing so. I have been living away from America for many years. That is an advantage, for after living abroad you see your country in the total setting of the world. "He who knows only one language doesn't know any"; so he who knows only one country doesn't know any. You must see

The Christ of the American Road

your country, with all its strengths and weaknesses and shortcomings, in contrast. No one has ever really seen the Statue of Liberty who hasn't seen it after a long absence from this land. I can understand the soldier who, after a long absence in the South Seas, on returning to America knelt down and kissed the soil of his homeland. Something goes up and down my spine whenever, after a long time abroad, I sail up the Hudson and see the Statue of Liberty. And if a silent tear of gratitude for the meaning of that statue falls down my cheeks, I let it fall—unashamed.

But just to be away and come back is not enough. You must get under the skin of the situation when you do come back. In none of my previous visits had I ever been able to accomplish that. I talked to America from the outside. I preached *at* her, and most of the preaching was critical. America was not what I had hoped to find her, and I told her so, sometimes in stinging phrases. I never *belonged*. I felt I belonged to the East, and was talking to the West. I felt I must plead for my adopted lands against the wrongs the West had imposed on them.

Now I belong to America—not supremely, of course, for that allegiance is subject to a higher allegiance—but I do belong. This book has been written from the inside, and I'll tell you how I got on the inside: God put me there.

The night before I went off to college to study for the ministry the pastor of the little church where I was brought up and converted preached a sermon on the text: "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him." To my surprise and youthful embarrassment the sermon was about my going away. When I came back from

Introduction

college and was about to sail for India, the pastor preached another sermon on the text, "The Lord shall preserve thy going out, and thy coming in, from this time forth, and even for evermore." Of course to me the emphasis was upon "thy going out"—the adventure of leaving my native land to begin a walk with the Christ of the Indian Road. It did not strike me at all that the emphasis would ever shift to the phrase "thy coming in," that I should ever feel the same tingle of adventure in coming back to my native land, not merely to see loved ones and friends, although that was precious, but to discover and to walk with the Christ of the American Road. But that has happened. I had thrilled to my fingertips in discovering and interpreting the Christ of the Indian Road, and in walking with him. But I have thrilled more deeply—perhaps more mature years have made that possible—as I have awakened to the possibility of the meaning of the Christ of the American Road to this and other lands. *I think I see something.*

My eyes began to open in the following incident. Two months before I was to come back to America for the National Christian Mission, when I was at the Sat Tal Ashram in the Himalayas, out of a clear sky the Inner Voice said, "It's all right; I'll get you there safely and on time." That Voice kept repeating those words. I wondered about it, for I saw no reason for such a persistent assurance. I had my reservation on a French plane from Calcutta to Hong Kong, and from there was to take the "President Coolidge" to San Francisco, which would give me ample time to meet my first engagement in the opening of the Ashram at Saugatuck, Michigan. But I soon found there was reason for that assurance. France collapsed and with it the French air line.

The Christ of the American Road

Then I obtained a reservation on an Italian boat, but Italy got into the war, and that was out. My last hope was a reservation on a Japanese steamer calling at India, which would get me to Hong Kong in time to get the clipper across the Pacific. But the Mediterranean closed when Italy got into the war, and this steamer could not get through. Everything fell to pieces. Possibilities of going East or West were sealed.

Two days before I sailed I hadn't a possibility, and yet the Voice persisted, "It's all right; I'll get you there safely and on time." So I was inwardly calm and assured, for the Voice had never let me down. Two days before I sailed I was informed that an American steamer was sailing from Bombay via South Africa to New York. I found on arrival at Bombay that the steamer would take forty days for the trip, and forty days would not get me there on time, and the Voice had said, "Safely and *on time*." Still it was the only thing open, and I took it. In South Africa we were held up a further three days, which would make me ten days late. Still I was calm and assured, and was able to give undivided attention to the finishing of the manuscript of *Is the Kingdom of God Realism?*

After sailing from South Africa the captain announced that he would have to stop in Trinidad, West Indies, for oil and water. I found Trinidad was on the line of the clippers to South America and wired for reservation on the clipper to Miami, Florida. We arrived at Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, one evening, and I sailed the next morning by clipper plane across the Carribean, eighteen hundred miles in twelve hours. By evening I was in Miami, was met by Guy Black, who was going to take part in the Mission, got his viewpoint,

Introduction

and took the train to Chicago. I felt a little sorry that I couldn't go via New York to see the Mission secretaries there, but on arrival in Chicago I found them all in the hotel where I stopped for the night. Having settled up matters with them and started by car from Chicago to Saugatuck, I told my host, who was driving the car, of this Voice and the journey thus far. His reply was: "If you've come thus far on that certificate, then we'll get there safely and on time."

But about twenty miles from Saugatuck the hydraulic brake on the car went off, and we careened back and forth across the road, narrowly missed a ditch, and pulled up just this side of disaster. That brake had to be fixed. We went to a village five miles back to get the garage man to repair it. He worked on it for three hours, and I watched the clock. Just as we were about to cross the deadline for getting there "on time" the garage man called out, "I've got it." We jumped into the car, and just as we were driving into the camp grounds the bell was ringing for the opening of the Ashram. We were there "safely and on time"! It was twelve thousand miles of quiet miracle. I simply could not have thought out that journey beforehand, and without the assurance I would not have been able to complete the manuscript and have such a restful voyage.

But that simple incident did something else: it showed me that as God had blessed the "going out" he was blessing the "coming in," that America was to be the place of spiritual adventure as India had been, that as he had called me to India so he was calling me for the time being to America, that, as I now see, I was to walk with the Christ of the

American Road. The National Christian Mission was hallowed by this incident. I went through it with a deep sense of awed gratitude.

A further incident clarified and intensified this call to adventure with the Christ of the American Road. At the completion of the National Christian Mission, in which I had spoken from three to five times a day for twenty-two weeks, I was awakened one morning at four o'clock with the Inner Voice saying, "I want you here." I was startled and, quite unconvinced, reminded myself that I couldn't do it—the Mission was over, my family was in India, my work was there, the boat was to sail that day with my baggage, and I was to catch it by plane two weeks later in the Philippine Islands. Everything—passage, passport, visé—everything was arranged for me to return. But the Voice persisted, "I want you here," and after two hours of vainly struggling against it I saw that there was nothing to do but obey. I arose and wrote out five telegrams, one of which asked that my baggage be taken off the boat, as I could not go.

Perhaps I should answer the query arising in the minds of many and say that I do not habitually nor supremely rely on the "Voice" for guidance. God guides through a number of ways: supremely through the life and teaching of Jesus, through the accumulated wisdom of the Church gathered through the centuries, through personal counsel of individuals, through matching us against an open door of opportunity, through our heightened moral and spiritual intelligence, and finally through the Inner Voice. That Inner Voice usually comes only when the other ways are not relevant, or clear and decisive. But when it does come, it is self-authenticating. It does not argue with you as do the

voices from the subconscious. It speaks with quiet but unmistakable authority and assurance, and when it comes, it is always right. It has never let me down.

But what did this Voice, "I want you here," mean? What it will finally mean only the years will unfold. But it has meant, among other things, trying in a humble way over many months as a go-between to avert the war between Japan and America—"an adventure in failure." It has meant three and one-half years of painful separation from my family and from India; but it has also meant the most fruitful years of evangelism I have ever known; it has meant the writing of *Abundant Living*, which I could not have written outside of America; and above all it has meant the discovery of, and an adventure with, the Christ of the American Road.

What a Christ this is! taking the energies and pioneering spirit of a people gathered from all climes and all races, and in spite of all their sins and prejudices welding them into a living whole until they become perhaps the most united nation on earth, and perhaps the greatest.

Christ has done this? Yes, for without his spirit working at the heart of this American civilization—cleansing, inspiring, uniting—this civilization would not have been possible. He is the cement that holds it together. Through its centrifugal forces and its dividing sins it would fall to pieces tomorrow without him. He is the most cleansing, constructive, potent force working within the soul of this people—and its one hope.

A big claim? It is! But as we trace how Christ's spirit has been woven into the beginnings, the continuous history, and the future of this people, you will probably come to the

The Christ of the American Road

conclusion that there is more there than can be told. In this book I have only glimpsed it. Someday we may grasp it, and grasp it on a wide scale, so that we may lay hold on his cleansing and regenerating power to remake and guide this dynamic entity called America.

As the dispirited disciples walked along the Emmaus Road after the crucifixion, they were joined by a stranger. Afterward, recounting what had happened, they said: "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" It may be that as we walk down through the pages of this book we shall be joined by the Christ of the American Road; and maybe our hearts too will burn within us as he talks with us by the way, and as he opens to us the Scriptures and the covenants of our national history, and as he points us to our national destiny.