

*Christ*  
*at the*  
*Round Table*

BY  
E. STANLEY JONES

HODDER AND STOUGHTON  
LIMITED LONDON

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CHRIST AT THE ROUND TABLE

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*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*  
THE CHRIST OF THE  
INDIAN ROAD

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*Round Table*

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## INTRODUCTION

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THIS book has written itself. During the twenty years of intimate contact with the soul of the East it has been slowly writing itself in the inmost depths of my being. In hours of innumerable personal conversations, in times of quiet but fierce clash of idea upon idea, in periods when I have opened my soul to the beauty and thought of India, in hours of prayer, in moments of brooding over the mind of Christ in Sacred Writ, and most of all in the Round Table Conferences where we have bared soul to soul, these pages have been written and these convictions formed. They have come to me almost irresistibly, and now it seems that I do not hold them, rather do these convictions seem to hold me.

Not that they are unalterable and fixed. For if there has been one guiding principle which has held me these years it has been this: No plans that cannot be changed if they cease to be vital and real, and no convictions that cannot be altered if fuller light comes.

But if these pages have written themselves, the transcribing of them has brought heart-searchings. How can one bring back the atmosphere of these Round Table Conferences? Will not the beauty and delicacy of these hallowed moments fade and wither if plucked from their quiet surroundings? Can we be objective and fair in drawing our con-



clusions? Is the purpose to win a religious victory or to find reality? Is there a desire to justify a missionary movement or to help someone as we have been helped? Can we be loyal to the land of our adoption and yet loyal to our deepest convictions? How can we be free to speak of life as we saw it at the Round Tables unless we be free to face life as it is—its weaknesses and its strengths, its successes and its failures? Although I have held the principle that my chief concern should be to present my constructive message, leaving untouched in public address the religious systems that my hearers held so that they might be free to draw their own conclusions, can I now freely speak of life as I see it?

Whether satisfactory answers to some of the above questions can be given must be judged as we go on our way through the narrative and to its conclusions.

My impulse has been not to quote directly what men were saying in the Round Tables, but to write of general impressions. But I have felt this would be unfair, particularly to Hinduism. So much stress has been laid in the West on the lower phases of Hinduism that the impression that the ordinary man of the West holds is that it is made up of caste, idolatry, child widows, and so on. He thinks of religion as centred in the temple. So if I spoke of Hinduism in this book, I would be interpreted as meaning temple Hinduism. The fact is that the Hinduism of educated India does not centre in the temple but in the Upanishads and the Bhagawad Gita. The possible exception to this is South India, where temple Hinduism has a stronger hold. Even here the Saiva Siddhanta, centring in the poems of the Tamil saints, holds the hearts of the educated

rather than does the temple. You might wipe out the Hinduism centring in the temple, along with caste and corrupt social customs, and this Hinduism centring in the Upanishads would live on, perhaps with greater power. But it is not the ordinary man of the West alone who is labouring under this misunderstanding. I showed some of the statements made by the members of our Round Table Conferences to a highly intelligent Westerner who had been in India for forty years, and his comment was: "Well, I'm very glad to find that they are thinking about these things and not merely going blindly to the temple." Thinking about these things? Why, "there are more words for philosophic and religious thought in Sanskrit than in Greek, Latin, and German put together." India has thought on these things more deeply than any other people on earth, and if her philosophy has suffered from anything it has not been from underthought, but from overstrain. Moreover, it is not educated India alone which holds these ideas of the Upanishads—they have to a very great extent percolated down into the masses, so that the ordinary worshipper who goes to the idol temple goes there with a higher interpretation of life in his mind, and he explains his idolatry in the light of the background of the All of the Upanishads: If Brahma is the All, then why should not this idol be worshipped as a portion of Him? This philosophic Hinduism is all-pervasive and not confined to the educated few.

I felt I would be unfair if I did not let these representatives speak and interpret their own faith. I could do it because these Round Table Conferences were not Round Table Confidences. They were

open and frank, each man laying before us what religion was meaning to him. Each was given the chance to say the best he could about his own faith. Surely no one could object to having such statements repeated. The presupposition is that he would be glad to have it done, provided it is done sympathetically and fairly. This in fact has been the attitude taken by those non-Christians from whom enquiry has been made. But after full enquiry where any hesitation or objection to having his views repeated has been shown, in these cases we have refrained. In only two cases have there been objections.

Another consideration which now makes it possible to speak openly about things concerning which it would have been scarcely possible a few years ago is the fact that Gandhiji \* in his autobiography, entitled *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, is showing the way to a new frankness. Week by week he bares his soul and discusses freely his attitudes toward Christianity and other religions and his reasons for deciding upon the religious life he now leads. The door for frank discussion is now open—opened by an Indian hand.

I found myself not particularly interested in the victory, as such, of one religious system over another. That might take place and we be still far from the goal. We were after truth and reality and spiritual freedom, and we knew that it was possible that one religious system might conquer another and these questions remain untouched, or worse, be lost in the struggle. The Crusaders conquered Jerusalem and

\* I refrain from using the term "Mahatma" because of his declared dislike to it, reserving to myself the right, however, to hold him to be a "great soul"; "ji" is a term of respect.

found in the end that Christ was not there. They had lost Him through the very spirit and methods by which they sought to serve Him. Many more modern and more refined crusaders end in that same barrenness of victory. Mere proselytisation partakes of these methods and shares the same barrenness of results. We wanted something deeper and more fundamental. The fact is that the final issue is not between the systems of Christianity and Hinduism or Buddhism or Mohammedanism, but between Christlikeness and unChristlikeness, whether that unChristlikeness be within the non-Christian systems or within Christendom. The final issue is between Christ and other ways of life. If in the opening chapters we have had occasion to deal with unChristlikeness outside, before we are through we face it within Christendom.

Moreover, our problems are not Eastern or Western problems, but just human. Human need and human sin are not geographical. Materialism and greed and moral failure and spiritual yearning are in the East and in the West; they are found wherever man is found. Can we not, then, sit down at the Round Table of Life and face our problems, not as Easterners or Westerners, but as men, and see if there is a way out?

As to being scientifically objective in coming to conclusions, I might as well confess that I probably will not be. Not that I do not want to be, but that, first of all, I have not had that intensive training in scientific methods so necessary if one is to be objective and scientific; and second, I have brought too much of subjectivity to these Conferences to be absolutely objective. Religion has meant too much to me during these years to

be able to stand off and view it apart from that fact. That may be a disqualification—and it may not. At any rate, this book does not pretend to be written in a detached, judicial manner. I am an evangelist recording impressions that have come to me in the midst of my evangelistic work. These impressions compel me to become an advocate. This fact will cause what I say to be discounted in the minds of some. This is inevitable and to be expected. Moreover, dealing with religious values, in the nature of the case, the impressions recorded will seem subjective. This, too, is inevitable.

Another consideration weighed with me. We as Christians find ourselves in a very serious crisis. A number of things have brought it on. The scientific mind with its demand for the attitude toward life of open-mindedness and for conclusions based on the facts, and its handmaid historical criticism of the Scriptures, have challenged many claimed infallibilities in many realms. This is a world-shaking movement. The full force of it has not yet struck the non-Christian faiths. That will come. But *we* are in the throes of it.

Another factor making for disturbance of mind has been the discovery of Sanskrit literature. It has opened to the West an amazing world of philosophical and literary treasure. Schopenhauer voiced the extreme wing of appreciation when he said: "The Upanishads have been my consolation in life, they will be my consolation in death." At first the Church was indifferent or hostile toward this storehouse, but Christian scholars have been sifting out the finest from it and what was the property of the scholar is now becoming available for the ordinary Christian. Through comparative

religions the rank and file are now seeing that God has not left Himself without witness in any land, and that truth and lofty thinking are not the exclusive possession of any race. Human intercourse is getting closer every day, and we are discovering that worth and ability and goodness are not confined to particular geographical areas or to special tints of skin.

The ordinary Christian is being compelled to relate his Christianity to these facts.

Other elements making for disturbance have been the disillusionment following the War, and the deep questionings of the soundness of Western Civilisation and the bitter criticisms of it from both East and West. They have contributed to the vast uncertainty.

Unsympathetic attitudes and contempt toward foreign cultures and religions and national aspirations have in large measure given way to appreciation and sympathy. This is to be welcomed and cultivated, but the fact must not be overlooked that this has a tendency to cut under exclusive claims and to undermine evangelistic passion. It was easier to be evangelistic when the issues were more fiercely defined. Finally, Theosophy steps in amid the resulting bewilderment, waves its hand and says: "All religions have the same underlying truths. The differences are in the details—at the centre they are one." The tendency of all this is to wipe out distinctions, tone down superiorities, and have everything end in a diffused kindly feeling, or as someone has put it, "in a mush of amiability." All these things put together are disconcerting and disturbing.

The more I think of it the more I realise that the

most dangerous thing the Christian Church ever did was to send us to India. Not dangerous to us. It matters little whether we live or die. But to start a moral and spiritual offensive in the heart of the most religious and philosophical race of the world, and that at a time when the weapons of modern criticism and modern knowledge are available for counter-attack, is too dangerous for words. For suppose it should be revealed amid that struggle that Christianity is only one among the many ways, that its claim to finality is untenable, that its sharp alternatives are not valid, that it is only a stage in the evolution of religion and it will be passed by, the final stage being a sifted amalgam from the whole? What would be the result of this? Certainly the missionary movement would, at least as now carried on, wane and die. And it is questionable whether, with the conviction of finality gone, Christianity could hold continued sway over the mind of the West.

Amid this Vast Uncertainty has the gospel of Christ any certainty to offer? Will it show itself capable of bringing to confused minds and distressed souls everywhere a new sense of reality and certainty under this awful scrutiny, yes, even because of it? Is it founded upon Life, and will it therefore stand the shocks of Life? Or is it a great and heroic guess at the solution of the riddle of Life? Would the Round Table Conferences shed any light on these problems?

We had not gone very far with the Conferences with the non-Christians before we saw that here was a method of discovering reality that would be valuable for us as Christians. The deepest things of religion need a sympathetic atmosphere. In an

atmosphere of debate and controversy the deepest things, and hence the real things of religion, wither and die. In order to discover what is most delicate and fine in religion there must be an attitude of spiritual openness, of inward sensitiveness to the Divine, a willingness to be led by the beckoning spiritual facts. We felt the Conferences tended to bring this. The sense of battle seemed to fade out and common spiritual quest and sharing took its place.

The fact cannot be disguised that we as Christians have our internal controversy. It has largely partaken of the method of long-distance duelling. We have shelled each other's positions, or what we thought were the positions, but there has been much smoke and confusion and not a little un-Christian feeling. Why not sit down at Round Tables as Christian men and women and see what religion is meaning to us in experience? We would listen reverently to what the other man would say it was bringing to him, and we would share what it was meaning to us. At the close we might not be agreed, but we would be mutually enriched and certainly we would be closer to the real issues. And we would be on the right lines of approach in facing these issues and in finding their solutions.

But this controversy and the Round Tables as a possible method of approaching it was not in our minds when we began to have them for Christians only. The purpose was to face the question of how religion was working, what it was doing for us, and how we could find deeper reality. Under this quiet but searching scrutiny some missionaries and Christian workers with a great deal of restrained emotion have told the group quite frankly that it



was not working except in outward phases, that the deepest things were not there. But often before the Conferences were over lives have been renewed and new depths found.

The valuable thing for us as Christians in the Round Table Conferences with non-Christians lay in the fact that we were compelled to rethink our problems in the light of the non-Christian faiths and in the light of the religious experiences of non-Christians. So while these Conferences have been valuable in our approach to the non-Christian faiths, they have proved of even greater value to us in facing our own problems, spiritual and intellectual. They have given some answers to the problems now facing us in the crisis we have mentioned above.

But the most difficult question of all had to be faced before I could go on: Dared I try to see life and see it whole and tell what I saw? The answer came back: "Yes, provided you are willing to face what you hold in the same frank way." And I found myself willing, even eager, for I felt that if any adverse appraisal must be given, I would do it with as much tenderness as I would point out the fading health on my mother's cheek.

Moreover, I knew that, if criticism were considered necessary in the Indian situation, none of it would be directed toward the Indian people, whom I consider one of the finest and most lovable people on earth, but only against yokes that need to be lifted to let this great people go free.

If there is a conclusion running through this book it will probably be found to be this: Christ represents Religion. Organised Christianity, mixed as it is with the mind of Cæsar and the Mind of Christ,