

# The Centering Moment: The Spiritual and Soul-Care Practice of Howard W. Thurman

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In my sermons, spiritual direction sessions, and personal conversations, I often mention Howard Washington Thurman, a twentieth-century African American Baptist mystic theologian whose enduring works speak to future generations of diverse Christians. Listeners always want to know, “Who is Howard Thurman?” Many of them have never heard of him and thus do not appreciate his invaluable contribution to American religious history and Christian spirituality. Their unfamiliarity with Thurman deprives them of benefiting from his spiritual and soul-care practices. His body of work offers a means of exploring spiritual formation and soul care utilizing the biblically based teachings of Jesus. Thurman distinguishes between formal, official Christianity and the “religion of Jesus.” In this article, I would like to offer a brief introduction of Thurman himself and his spiritual and soul-care journey.

Howard Thurman is arguably one of the foremost contributors to African American spirituality specifically, and American spirituality generally, in the twentieth century. Yet his significant impact remains widely unknown in most Christian and religious communities. I first encountered the thoughts and writings of Howard Thurman more than four decades ago while a student at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Thurman graduated from our alma mater in 1923. His books were required reading for courses I took in religion and philosophy. During my seminary and graduate school studies, I delved more deeply into his theological system of Christian and mystic spirituality. His work

persists as a significant and resounding voice in my spiritual odyssey. I utilize his spiritual practices in cultivating my own spiritual disciplines. My formal introduction to spiritual direction strengthened my desire to explore Thurman's extensive collection juxtaposing spiritual formation and social justice.

I glimpsed the life and interior spirituality of Thurman through the prism of a congregant whom I served at Oakdale Covenant Church in Chicago, Illinois, where I have enjoyed the privilege of being senior pastor for more than a quarter of a century. The late Wilverlyn Williams was the goddaughter of Thurman and his wife, Sue Elvie Bailey Thurman. The Williams family enjoyed close relational ties to the Bailey and Thurman families. Her brother, Samuel Woodrow Williams, attended Morehouse College partially because of Thurman, who became his mentor. Interestingly, Williams would become a faculty member at Morehouse College who influenced Martin Luther King Jr. Thurman consistently acknowledged Samuel W. Williams as a source of inspiration. In his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, Thurman reminisced about the importance of Samuel Williams's teaching, writing, and friendship. "Samuel W. Williams was a great teacher. . . . He lifted us to the highest levels of responsibility in scholarship and commitment."<sup>1</sup> Wilverlyn Williams shared many stories and fond memories of Thurman and their families. She particularly recounted the close relationship between her brother, Professor Williams, and Dr. King. I still marvel over this connection between Oakdale Covenant Church and these theological and spiritual giants. Mrs. Williams's life and legacy personified this historical link.



(L-R) Corretta and MLK,  
Samuel Williams, John Lewis  
*Undated photo, courtesy of Williams family*

In this article, like a museum curator or a tour guide, I would like to expose the reader to the profound spiritual and soul-care insights of Thurman's work and legacy. What was his early spiritual formation, and how did it shape his spiritual journey? Consider the impact of his formative years and community. What foundational questions guided

<sup>1</sup> Howard W. Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Company, 1981), 33.

his life and ministry? His answers challenged and empowered King and other advocates in the Civil Rights Movement. Thurman advanced that spiritual maturity inevitably yields social transformation and justice.

On November 18, 1899, near Daytona Beach, Florida, Thurman was born, three years following the *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 US 537, 1896 decision of the United States Supreme Court that constitutionally sanctioned and legalized segregation throughout the nation. He missed slavery by two generations. This grandson of previously enslaved people remarkably became one of the most influential African American spiritual, religious, educational, and social leaders of the century. Through collegial and personal relationships, writings, sermons, speeches, pastoral service, and otherwise, Thurman employed primary Christian tenets of spirituality to encourage and empower followers of Jesus to internalize and practice the religion of Jesus. Although he did not use contemporary terms such as “spiritual direction” and “soul care,” Thurman taught meditative and contemplative practices in his writings and lifestyle. In fact, these spiritual principles and practices appeal to people of all faiths. In his vast writings, sermons, and lectures, he was intentional in his pursuit of promoting spiritual formation and social justice.

A versatile leader, Thurman excelled in multiple roles such as preacher, educator, theologian, multiracial and multicultural church planter, pastor, mystic, and a few others. He did not march in any of the major campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement, like the March to Selma, the March on Washington, or other events. Nevertheless, he played a crucial role in constructing a theological framework for social movements for justice and legal equality. Practicing contemplative spirituality, Thurman progressed in mysticism as he believed religious experience is most effectively explored within one’s consciousness and character. A complete understanding and study of African American spiritual direction and soul care must include an appreciation for his contributions.

Parenthetically, I define “spiritual direction” and “soul care” as they relate to one’s personal beliefs and values. In its simplest form, spiritual direction is personal communication and relational intimacy with God that fosters self-realization as a unique child of God and the ability to live according to the principles of this relationship.<sup>2</sup> Practically, one Christian assists another in paying attention to the unfolding communication and revelation of an intimate relationship with God and encouraging a fel-

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<sup>2</sup> William A. Barry and William J. Connally, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 8.

low disciple to live out the consequences of that relationship. Soul care is the intentional nurturing of the soul through fostering a deep and maturing connection with Jesus Christ. Thurman's work is especially beneficial to anyone who dedicates themselves to spiritual wisdom and progress. Thurman emphasizes introspection as the means of flourishing in a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Thurman, as a provider and recipient, wove spiritual direction and soul care into his theological system and daily living. Throughout his life, Thurman sought spiritual guidance from family, peers, mentors, and myriad sacred texts. As he received empowerment, he guided others in his pastoral ministry, teaching, and writing. Three persons, however, were pivotal in building Thurman's spiritual and existential foundation: his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose; the Quaker mystic Rufus Jones; and Mahatma Gandhi of India. Whereas there were others, these three individuals appear consistently and repeatedly in his work.

Thurman's approach to spiritual formation emerged from the deep wells and roots of his Christian faith and his commitment to the universal and enduring principles of love, compassion, and justice. This pastor, professor, and mystic posited spiritual development as a collaborative journey between a seeker and a guide. This relational experience employs mutual respect, trust, communication, and openness to the movement of the spirit. Thurman stressed the importance of wholehearted listening, silence, withdrawal, and discernment in the process of spiritual direction. These practices enable individuals to learn from their inner wisdom as it occurs within God's presence.

Many global indigenous religions and spiritual traditions value contemplative practices. Thurman emerges among spiritual leaders in this movement as a pioneer through his passion for blending contemplation and social justice. He set a precedent for integrating spirituality with social justice advocacy. Thereby, he insisted that personal contemplative awareness is insufficient as an adherent to the religion of Jesus if disciples fail to combine it with social action. More specifically, activism includes different and equally important approaches. Caring for the most vulnerable people, whom Jesus in Matthew 25 characterizes as "the least of these," through the provision of food, clothing, housing, education, healthcare, transportation, employment, environmental health, global geopolitical justice, safety, and other embodied needs are all meaningful means of advocating for social justice. These are not subordinate to marching, speeches, legislation, public policy, governmental affairs, social media presence, or public discourse.

Thurman grew up in the years of unapologetic southern segregation and vile, blatant racism. He wrestled with defining an articulation and system of Christianity that combated this social dilemma. He grappled with conceptualizations of Christian and biblical teachings that were complicit with laws, social structures, theology, and economic policies that vehemently dehumanized a large swath of humankind and the Christian community. He did not understand professed Christians who advocated racial segregation, discrimination, violence, and lynching of African Americans and other people of color. Direct agents of oppression believed that God sanctioned their behavior. From slavery to segregation to the burgeoning global village which responded in horror to violence, countless African Americans and people of color share Thurman's concerns about the incompatibility of Christianity and racial injustice. How does Christianity, which possesses the transformative power to liberate a person from enslavement to sins such as addiction, crime, and other forms of perpetual immoral, illegal, and unethical behavior, marginalize, exploit, and oppress certain ethnic groups based upon their skin color? Thurman's writings give voice to the pain of living under segregation.

There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count and that no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person. The threat of violence is ever-present, and there is no way to determine precisely when it may come crashing down upon you.<sup>3</sup>

As disciples contemplate such evil, they equally discover means and methods of eradicating it. Thurman's concepts of spiritual direction yield empowerment to do so.

"Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion, and national origin?"<sup>4</sup> That question flows through the river of African American history from its inception in 1639 when slavery, racism, and White supremacy were first codified into American law.<sup>5</sup> Thurman answers this profound theological question that contends with theodicy, evil, and the will and character of God in his short, compelling, and powerful book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, first published in 1949.

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<sup>3</sup> Howard W. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 39–40. Originally published in 1949 by Abingdon Press.

<sup>4</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 19.

Is religion itself inherently weak? Is Christianity's impotence a betrayal of the genius of the religion itself? Thurman proposes yet another question as he answers the primary one: "What does the religion of Jesus have to say to those with their 'backs against the wall'?" Thurman was perplexed by Christianity's failure to address and utilize one of its chief tenets. The Gospel evangelists record the necessity that Christian disciples love their neighbors as they love themselves and love one another as Christ loves each of them. The fourth Gospel specifically articulates love as the fundamental distinguishing characteristic of Christians.

Thurman stated that as early as he could remember, he was puzzled by the fact that in his own religious background, training, and exposure both before he went to school and all during the years that he was a student, that maybe only once or twice did he ever hear any sermon which dealt with what the religion of Jesus had to say to the person whose back was against the wall. It was always how you must treat him; you must administer to his needs. But this was his concern: What did it say to the man who was up against it? Could it address him? Not his needs, but him.<sup>6</sup>

He lamented the failure of previous generations to ask this question. Conceivably, their inability or unwillingness to do so retarded the materialization of social justice protest movements and personal civil disobedience. In response to his disappointment in finding intellectually respectable questions and answers, Thurman began his own search. Perceived as radical and revolutionary for his time, Thurman explored many concepts that drew wisdom from myriad sources as the questions loomed on the canvas of his life and era. I posit that his grandmother Mrs. Ambrose, Rufus Jones, and Gandhi combined to offer suitable intellectual and existential answers. They were primary architects in his theological system.

It is hard to underestimate the spiritual treasure of Thurman's grandmother in assisting him in arriving at a logical and experiential answer to his foregoing questions. Her view of Christianity greatly influenced Thurman's theological and spiritual thinking. A survivor of the horrors of slavery, Nancy Ambrose questioned whether the New Testament approved of the diabolical system that relegated her forebears to being property and treated like livestock. In his autobiography, Thurman recalls his grandmother, when listening to the reading of the Bible, would direct the reader to skip any passages like the Pauline letters that seemingly endorsed slavery. Her difficulty with those texts became his dilemma,

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<sup>6</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 13.

given their very close relationship. Thurman's father died suddenly and unexpectedly when Thurman was a young boy. Accordingly, his mother became the head of the household and the sole provider for his two sisters and him. While his mother worked to maintain their family, his grandmother served as the primary caretaker. Not surprisingly, many people acquire their cardinal values, principles, and beliefs from their grandparents. Thurman enjoyed the blessings and benefits of that pivotal relationship. Mystically, she chiseled his character into the values that would guide him toward his lifelong spiritual path.

Her indelible influence instilled within him a profound and enduring faith, dignity, and resilience. Those key attributes would guide him in formulating an authentically Christian and biblical response to racial segregation and its residual, systemic inequities. Grandmother Nancy Ambrose's stories of resilience and faith in the furnace of oppression inspired Thurman's unwavering commitment to social justice in answering his profound spiritual inquiry. She embodied the fortitude and legacy of generations of African Americans who endured prevalent and persistent injustices. Despite unimaginable hardships, she maintained her self-worth as a unique child of God, thereby imparting these values to her grandson. Her stories of survival and perseverance amid adversity empowered Thurman and bequeathed an immeasurable resilience of the human spirit. Her prayers, hymns, and religious teachings provided a foundation for Thurman's spiritual journey, nurturing his connection to the Divine and his commitment to social justice.

Thurman described his grandmother's lessons as having directness of speech and simplicity of faith. She posited "that life was to be lived by a simple trust in God."<sup>7</sup> More significantly, Thurman recalls, "I learned more, for instance, about the genius of the religion of Jesus from my grandmother than from all the men who taught me all...the Greek and all the rest of it, because she moved inside the experience [of the religion of Jesus] and lived out of that kind of center."<sup>8</sup> Essentially, Thurman considers his time and lessons from his grandmother as more beneficial than the formal training in systematic theology, biblical studies, religious history, and missional and practical components of ministerial studies. Reminiscent of David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, published originally in 1829 during the decades of radical abolitionism,

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<sup>7</sup> Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 1–29.

<sup>8</sup> Luther E. Smith, Jr., ed., *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 15.

Ambrose's ideas attack the contradictions between Christian concepts of human liberty and equality and racial injustice.<sup>9</sup> Walker, on the eve of the American Civil War ("The War Between the States"), exhorts Christians, generally and ironically enslaved Christians of African descent, to rise up in social, political, and military upheaval to resist the evils of chattel slavery. He unequivocally stated that slavery existed in total contradiction to the will and character of God. He further contended that Christianity demanded that they resist and eradicate this evil. Thurman's grandmother felt the same about the continuation of White supremacy through the century of social segregation that followed slavery. True to Thurman's description of her frankness, she did not mince words relating her disdain for the manipulation of Christianity to support inherently contradictory ideas and values. She rejected several of the Pauline letters because she suspected they condoned slavery, a brutal system of human degradation under which she personally suffered.

During a summer break following his sophomore year in college, when reading the Bible to his grandmother, Thurman summoned the courage to inquire about her refusal to listen to some of Paul's writings. She referenced the Baptist and Methodist ministers who evangelized enslaved people using Pauline passages to assure them that God intended chattel slavery as their purpose and a fulfillment of his will. Invariably, these preachers expounded upon the text found in Ephesians 6:5, "Slaves, be obedient to your masters for this is right in the Lord." Ambrose, having heard it and similar passages, resolved never to listen to its hearing when she became an adult.<sup>10</sup> Her objections and resistance toward the standard interpretations of the dominant culture regarding Christianity and race typified lingering theological debates about the character of God, the presence of evil, the allowance of evil, and the human tendency to categorize people according to race, ethnicity, culture, and other differentiating factors. Her protest of using the Bible to endorse systemic injustice foreshadowed the development of Black theology, a theological and scholarly movement borne of the Civil Rights Movement and simultaneous unrest on college and university campuses that insisted upon articulating a distinctly African American perspective of Christianity. Ambrose indirectly contributed to this system of thought through her

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<sup>9</sup> David Walker, *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, written in Boston, Sept. 28, 1829, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/triumphnationalism/cman/text5/walker.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 31.



mentoring influence on Thurman. His pen would write subsequently for both of them.

The Quaker mystic scholar and social activist Rufus Jones introduced Thurman to the formal study of mysticism. Jones served as a tour guide of sorts as Thurman navigated this new and unfamiliar academic and theological terrain. Thurman later described his tutelage with Jones as “a watershed from which flowed much of the thought and endeavor to which I was to commit the rest of my working life.”<sup>11</sup> Thurman credits Jones with demonstrating for him the confident and pragmatic insight that revelations from a person’s interior religious life could equip someone to confront the contradictions of daily experience. Essentially, religion did not have to be accommodationist as it relates to social and political contexts. In Thurman’s words, “categorically, the religion of the inner life at its best is life-affirming rather than life-denying.”<sup>12</sup> Learning with Jones, Thurman immersed himself into the Quaker tradition of silent worship and contemplative prayer. These spiritual disciplines disclosed mysticism as a conscious and direct encounter with God. Thurman’s journey integrated mysticism, spiritual practices, and social activism.

Howard Thurman studied and embraced various spiritual practices, drawing from varying religious traditions and cultural experiences to expand his connection with the Divine and cultivate inner peace. His developing ideas about spirituality, social justice, and human dignity solidified in these practices. Prayer became a central spiritual discipline for Thurman. This modality furthers and facilitates communication with the Divine, wherein adherents receive guidance and obtain strength to surmount struggles in daily living. Thurman offered structured prayers from Christian tradition and spontaneous, heartfelt prayers that arose within his personal reflections and experiences.

I reiterate a major theme of this article. Thurman’s thoughts and life embody a powerful example of spiritual consciousness, interior reflection, personal practice, and preparation for social justice activism. Twenty-first century American Christians from diverse backgrounds and global citizens who adhere to other major faiths can glean spiritual development from Thurman’s writings. His mysticism and social activism translate into many contemporary geopolitical and regional challenges. Those in the

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<sup>11</sup> Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted by Matthew Fox, “Howard Thurman on the Via Negativa,” June 25, 2021, <https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2021/07/25/howard-thurman-on-the-via-negativa/#:~:text=Thurman%20wrestles%20with%20the%20question%20of%20asceticism,its%20best%20is%20life%20affirming%20rather%20than.>

struggle for social justice and equality can read Thurman and, respectively, find the bread of life and living water. Additionally, his concepts appeal to committed people of faith from all walks of life because he presents the religion of Jesus, which rests fundamentally upon the Ten Commandments, the Torah, the justice teachings of the Hebrew prophets, the Greatest Commandment, and the new Law of Love as evidenced in the Gospels and New Testament writings in a manner adaptable and transferable to all human societies. Thurman presents Christ, who embodies God's clearest and inimitable revelation of unending love, as a mediator of love, truth, peace, and justice. Indirectly, Thurman appeals to some people of other faiths who resonate with following Christ as Thurman's understanding of Christian mysticism and contemplative practices.<sup>13</sup> Instead of a formal and official Christian religion that furthers the political ideology and economic goals of its purveyors, the religion of Jesus reaffirms God's love for each person as a child of God and empowers each individual to achieve self-realization, which includes seeking the fulfillment of Micah 6:8, "He has shown you, O mortal what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (NIV).

Let us consider five rudimentary spiritual practices that Thurman faithfully pursued: meditation, contemplative reading, reflection and journaling, nature contemplation, and community worship. First, Thurman embraced meditation as a way to cultivate inner stillness, mindfulness, and spiritual awareness. He often engaged in silent meditation, focusing his attention on the present moment and opening himself to God's presence. Thurman saw meditation as a means of deepening his connection with the Divine and accessing inner wisdom. Second, Thurman was an avid reader of sacred texts, spiritual writings, and poetry, which he approached with a contemplative mindset. He saw in these texts a source of spiritual insight and inspiration, engaging with them deeply and reflectively to discern their deeper meanings and implications for his own life and spirituality. Third, Thurman regularly reflected and journaled to process his thoughts, feelings, and spiritual experiences. He saw writing as a form of spiritual practice, using it to explore his innermost thoughts, wrestle with questions of faith, and document his journey of spiritual growth and discovery. Fourth, Thurman found solace and inspiration in the natural world, viewing it as a manifestation

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<sup>13</sup> Jean Burden, "Howard Thurman," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1953 (4) 39-44.

of the divine presence. He often spent time in nature, contemplating creation's beauty and wonder, connecting with God, and renewing his spirit. Finally, as a minister and spiritual leader, Thurman participated in and led community worship services to nurture his own spiritual life and that of others. He saw communal worship as an opportunity to come together in fellowship, praise, and prayer, and to experience God's presence in the gathered community. Faithful and diligent practice of these five spiritual disciplines will enhance the spirituality of any committed adherent or community. Thurman's example endures to galvanize a myriad of people and faith communities.

At the heart of Thurman's mystical inquiry was a quest for direct, experiential encounters with the divine presence. He believed true spiritual insight could not be confined to intellectual understanding alone but required a deep, intuitive connection with the sacred. Thurman emphasized the importance of inner silence, contemplation, and prayer as pathways to encountering divine mystery. Thurman's mysticism transcended narrow sectarian boundaries and embraced insights from various religious traditions. He considered mysticism to be a universal human experience in which a profound encounter with the divine transcends the limitations of language, culture, and doctrine.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of the "inner sanctuary" was cardinal to Thurman's mystical worldview. It is the untarnished and sacred space within the human soul where an adherent communes with the divine presence. Sustained and steadfast adherence to spiritual disciplines is the passageway to the inner sanctuary where one experiences a profound sense of unity with God and creation. Thurman's mysticism was also deeply engaged with the world. It called individuals to embody the divine love and compassion they encountered in their mystical experiences. He saw mysticism not as an escape from the world but as a catalyst for social transformation—a source of inspiration and empowerment for those committed to justice, peace, and reconciliation.

Thurman's mystical vision profoundly influenced his theology and approach to social activism. He believed that the pursuit of justice and the quest for spiritual enlightenment were inseparable, calling individuals to engage in both inner and outer work to transform self and society. Thurman's teachings on mysticism inspired many activists, including Martin Luther King Jr., who saw in Thurman's vision of a beloved community

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<sup>14</sup> See Alton B. Pollard, III, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 19.

grounded in love and solidarity a robust framework for their struggles for justice and equality. Thurman invites us to explore the depths of our own souls, thus encountering the divine presence within everyday life. This internal journey enables us to work tirelessly to create a world where love, compassion, and justice permeate society. Seekers of truth and justice embrace mystical dimensions of life and strive for a more compassionate and interrelated world.

Thurman's spiritual practices departed radically from the spirited religious worship services and practices of the African American church of his formative years. Thurman's religious tradition included choirs singing, ministers preaching with unique cadence, peppered with shouts of "Amen!" and "Praise God!" There were no silent moments and very little quiet reflection. Thurman incorporated aspects of the Quaker tradition into a new religious tradition that nurtured his soul and expanded his spiritual journey. Thurman's mysticism sought social transformation by seeking healing for both the oppressed and the oppressor. His legacy continues to inspire individuals to seek inner transformation, cultivate compassion, and work toward a more just and inclusive society grounded in love and understanding.

A brief yet determinative meeting with Mahatma Gandhi became a defining moment for Thurman as it potentially answered his festering question about Christianity's inability to redress racism and bigotry. In 1935, Thurman led a group of African Americans on a mission trip to India. Intriguingly, this group was the first delegation of African Americans to meet Gandhi. On the trip, Thurman felt challenged to explain his reasons, as an African American, for retaining a belief in Jesus since Christianity had been manipulated to affirm the extensive suffering of people of color. A prominent professor on the faculty of one of India's universities forthrightly confronted Thurman. "What are you doing over here? I know what the newspapers say about a pilgrimage of friendship and the rest, but that is not my question. What are you doing here? That is what I mean." The straightforward professor continued,

More than three hundred years ago, your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. One of your famous Christian hymn writers, Sir John Newton, made his money from the sale of slaves to the New World. He is the man who wrote "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" and "Amazing Grace"—there may be others, but these are

the only ones I know. The name of one of the famous British slave vessels was “Jesus.” The men who bought the slaves were Christians. Christian ministers, quoting the Christian apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery. . . . During all the period since then you have lived in a Christian nation in which you are segregated, lynched, and burned. Even in the church, I understand there is segregation. One of my students who went to your country sent me a clipping telling about a Christian church in which the regular Sunday worship was interrupted so that many could join a mob against one of your fellows. When he had been caught and done to death, they came back to resume their worship of their Christian God. I am a Hindu. I do not understand. Here you are in my country, standing deep within the Christian faith and tradition. I do not wish to seem rude to you, but sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker people of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position.<sup>15</sup>

Provocatively and pivotally, the professor crystallized his dilemma into two basic, sensible questions: “Why are you a Christian when everyone connected to your bondage professes to be a Christian? Why are you so committed to something that is committed to your oppression and destruction?” Thurman struggled to answer. He was left without words.<sup>16</sup>

Thurman’s meeting with Gandhi yielded a critical and workable solution to his lifelong question regarding the ineffectiveness of Christianity. Gandhi’s ideology of nonviolent resistance greatly resonated with Thurman and motivated him to promote social change through love and reconciliation. At this meeting, which Thurman deemed as a central event of his life, Gandhi told Thurman, “It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world.”<sup>17</sup> Gandhi’s commitment to truth, love, and nonviolence profoundly influenced Thurman’s approach to social activism, shaping his belief in the transformative power of love and reconciliation. He correspondingly incorporated principles of nonviolence into the African American freedom struggle. King and other protest leaders coopted the phrase during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s.

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<sup>15</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 14–15.

<sup>16</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 14–15.

<sup>17</sup> Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 132.

Upon his return to the States, Thurman traversed the country and shared the relevance of nonviolent resistance as a means for addressing racial injustices. Smith, editor of Thurman's primary writings, summarizes Thurman's message and purpose: "Directly and indirectly, Thurman was the messenger for connecting the spiritual methods of India's struggle for independence to the need for a spiritually based nonviolent movement to transform racial injustices in the United States."<sup>18</sup>

Thurman's influence extended beyond theology and spirituality to practical activism. An early advocate for desegregation and social justice, he tested his theory of the beloved community by co-founding the first interracial and interfaith congregation in the United States, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco in 1944. Inspired by his experiences traveling and studying various world religions, Thurman envisioned a congregation that welcomed individuals of all races, ethnicities, and faith traditions, fostering a spirit of inclusivity and mutual respect. Its diverse membership included African Americans, European Americans, Asian Americans, and individuals from various religious backgrounds, united by a shared commitment to spiritual growth and social justice. In this place, people of diverse backgrounds came together in worship, fellowship, and solidarity. The Fellowship Church was a pioneering institution that embodied Thurman's belief in the power of community to transcend racial and religious divides. Beyond its walls, the Fellowship Church was a beacon of hope and inspiration for the broader community. Through its social justice initiatives and advocacy efforts, the congregation stood at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, challenging systemic racism and injustice while advocating for equality and dignity. Thurman saw multiracial churches as potent symbols of the beloved community—a vision of society characterized by love, justice, and inclusivity. He believed that such congregations had the potential to transcend the racial divisions and hierarchies that plagued society, offering a glimpse of a more just and equitable world.

Howard Thurman's spirituality encompassed a thoroughgoing consideration and exploration of the human experience. It posited the interconnectedness of all beings and the pursuit of inner peace for the individual and social upheaval when necessary to achieve justice and equality. Thurman's spirituality transcended religious boundaries. It offered a universal message of love, compassion, and social justice. One of Thurman's core

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Howard Thurman*, 20–21.

teachings was the search for common ground. He believed that differences in race, religion, and culture existed to create a shared humanity that united humankind. This belief compelled his commitment to fostering understanding and unity among individuals and communities. Thurman's contemplative spirituality evolved from his experiences of solitude and reflection. Inner silence and stillness are pathways to encountering the divine presence within oneself and the world. Through meditation, prayer, and mindfulness, Thurman encouraged individuals to become aware of their inner lives and to listen attentively to the voice of the spirit. Contemplative spirituality illuminates the path toward greater understanding, compassion, and social transformation. Thurman's legacy inspires countless adherents to embrace inherent human sacredness and, therefore, strive to achieve a more just and compassionate world.

Thurman answers the question relating to the existential worth of Christianity for African Americans and other people of color in his thought-provoking book *Jesus and the Disinherited*. When it was published in 1949, this book materialized within the historical context of fierce racial and social segregation in the United States. It offered (and still offers today) an adversarial theological analysis of that prevalent social injustice. Thurman centers upon the idea that Jesus of Nazareth, a marginalized Jew living under Roman occupation in the Ancient Near East, understood the struggles and aspirations of his fellow disinherited and oppressed people. Thurman interprets Jesus's teachings through the prisms of experience of those marginalized communities and through the lens of twentieth-century American social and economic inequality. He submits that these teachings proffer empowerment, liberation, hope, and dignity to people who suffer from systemic oppression. The disinherited suffer primarily because of race, class, culture, and social status. He contends that Jesus's message primarily addresses marginalized and vulnerable people, thereby offering a radical vision of a beloved community sharing love, justice, and social cohesion.

Thurman suggests there are three dangers that plague the hearts of the disinherited: fear, deception, and hatred.<sup>19</sup> Nonviolent resistance, forgiveness, and love of one's enemies surmount fear. Violence feeds upon and replicates itself. In attacking one's enemies, one prepares for one's own eventual destruction and death. Nonviolence invents the possibility of nullifying your opponent's violent impulses as you resist the obvious

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<sup>19</sup> Thurman addresses all three in his book *Jesus and The Disinherited*: Fear on page, 36, Deception on page 58, and Hate on page 74.

tendency to respond violently.

Moreover, it is possible to redeem an opponent's base motives and instincts as they may recoil from violence when met with nonviolence. Love for an enemy, as Jesus teaches, enables a nonviolent response to the horrors of segregation and lynch mobs. Thurman details the methods and means of how individuals overcome their fears and reclaim their inherent human dignity. More specifically, Thurman proposes a radical concept, "the love ethic," which is a revolutionary vision of love that transcends conventional notions of sentimentality or romantic affection. He clarifies Jesus's commandment to love one another as a call to action, thus challenging individuals to embody love as a force of social transformation and justice.<sup>20</sup> Thurman provides a re-evaluation of traditional theological norms and pragmatic spiritual guidance to resolve daily dilemmas. He emphasizes the importance of silence and solitude in nurturing the spiritual life from whence empowerment to combat evil, oppression, injustice, and turmoil arises. Quieting one's spirit in prayer and meditation unveils God's presence, which daily busyness often obscures. In reflective prayer, one finds divine resources to triumph over deception and hatred in addition to defeating fear. Contemplative spirituality eradicates emotional, mental, and practical dangers that plague the hearts of the disinherited.

"Why are you a Christian?" That question blared like neon lights on Thurman's theological canvas and mental consciousness. He concluded that he is a Christian because he belongs to the religion of Jesus and not the religion about Jesus. Thurman exhorts adherents to study and internalize the actual biblically based teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. He rebuffs the widespread commercial, official, and socially acceptable conceptualizations of Jesus, which affirms oppression, exploitation, and subjugation of the disinherited. A religion about Jesus commodifies an image of Jesus that distorts his teachings to further the political and economic aims of the ruling class. Those ideas affirm the destitution of the disinherited and argue its theological permissibility. As someone born poor and subject to daily oppression, Jesus was one of the disinherited and taught a religion that sought liberation, dignity, and justice for vulnerable people. Thurman remained a Christian because he formulated a concept of Christian and contemplative spirituality that enabled adherents to oppose and defeat systemic oppression such as slavery and segregation. Reminiscent of his grandmother, Thurman rebuffed official and orthodox Christianity, which demanded that African Americans uncritically accept

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<sup>20</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 89.



racial, social, political, and economic injustice. For Thurman, the true purpose of spiritual discipline was to “clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us. The aim is to get rid of whatever may so distract the mind and encumber the life that we function without this awareness, or as if it were not possible.”<sup>21</sup>

Thurman’s formal and enduring response to the question, crystallized in his theological understanding of mysticism, is practical, most evident, and authentic in social realities. It furthers transformation and healing for the oppressed and oppressors. He viewed Jesus’ teachings as a spiritual toolbox with which to attain self-realization and achieve personal destiny despite the rigors and ordeals of daily life. He sought more than favorable laws. He advocated for individual and societal wholeness and the recognition of divinity in each of the more than eight billion people who inhabit the globe. He knew the power of poverty and racism to destroy imaginations and hope in the minds and hearts of parents and children who are the disinherited. Thurman insists that God is present in everyone, and therefore, transformation occurs within the greatest and the least of any society. He believed anyone could become a mystic.

Thurman’s lectures on “Mysticism and Social Action” defined mysticism as “the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own soul....Such a response is total, affecting the inner quality of life and its outward expression as its manifestation.”<sup>22</sup> Suggestive of Rufus Jones’s teachings, Thurman proclaimed an “affirmative mysticism,” which posits God moves through our social structures as well as personal experience, seeking spiritual and interpersonal unity of all things. The mystic desires that everyone receives an opportunity to experience holiness and value borne of a personal relationship with God. Maturing beyond self-interest, the mystic sees our common humanity and empathizes with the suffering of the oppressed. Mystics embrace contrasting viewpoints as they progress from polarization to reconciliation. Understanding God as the source of all creation, the mystic wants all people to experience wholeness embedded within their unique personalities, cultures, and experiences. The mystic opposes conditions that threaten anyone’s encounter with God; they feel compelled to confront

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<sup>21</sup> Howard W. Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (1961; repr., New York: Friends United Press, 2007), 280.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Boeke, *Mysticism and Social Action: Lawrence Lectures and Discussions with Dr. Howard Thurman* (London: International Association for Religious Freedom, Book 3, 2015), 177–79, Kindle. Transcript of the Lawrence Lectures of 1978.

them. Social action resists systemic barriers to the disinherited actualizing their God-given talents, abilities, and endowments.

Spiritual wholeness is a necessity for healthy, functional, and just societies. Mandating social, political, and economic equity is a prerequisite to enabling average persons to pursue intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual growth. When people lack the daily necessities of food, clothing, shelter, transportation, employment, and other ancillary concerns, they equally lack the capacity, energy, and time for creative and self-empowering pursuits. The mystic strives for the annihilation of the foregoing impediments to any child of God manifesting God's revelation, will, and presence in daily living. The mystic's social agenda resolves personal trauma and removes widespread obstacles to personal development.

Powerful and wealthy perpetrators of injustice are also in spiritual jeopardy. Notwithstanding their social privileges and economic advantages, they are subject to the same limitations of injustice, particularly if they fail to redress seemingly intractable oppression and manipulation. Consumerism, political power, and entitlement cannot construct a fortress of self-gratification that shields them from natural and social forces. Moreover, the oppressor's injustice ultimately stunts their own soul in addition to those of the persons whom they oppress. Summarily, Thurman maintained that a vibrant mysticism which holds together the duality of each individual's uniqueness as a child of God and the nonnegotiable pursuit of a thoroughgoingly just society, is necessary to allow everyone a chance for self-realization.<sup>23</sup>

As I conclude this brief introduction of Howard Thurman and his groundbreaking contributions to twentieth-century American theology and spirituality as an African American Baptist and mystic, I invite you to pause and allow the emergence of a centering moment. Consider the mysterious and many ways in which Thurman's writings and spiritual legacy can enhance your own relationship with the Lord. Thurman's primary theological tenets complement American evangelicalism like a hand in a tailored glove. Commitment to a vibrant, growing, and deeply personal relationship with Christ is a cardinal principle of evangelical discipleship. Thurman expands this notion to posit that it requires the faithful practices of prayer, meditation, silence, solitude, and mindfulness, which in turn empower adherents to seek a just society that enables all of God's children to actualize God's will and their own capacities. Social

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<sup>23</sup> Alton B. Pollard, *III Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 44.

transformation surpasses the self-seeking and ulterior motives of political ideology and societal norms. Rooted in one's intimate communion with the Divine is the obligation to ensure that each person receives respect and dignity as a child of God.

Thurman conceived a religion that honors all people, especially the disinherited, persons whom society historically marginalizes because of distinguishing characteristics such as race, culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and much more—embracing an ethic of love for humankind that demands the removal of any systemic impediments to self-realization and acquisition of personal destiny. More practically, allocation of economic resources, proportionate sharing in governance, freedom in assembly and relationships, and wide latitude in belief and worship of God are the means and methods by which spiritual, religious, and reasonable people determine progress in achieving a just society. The combination of pursuing unity with God, attaining unconditional self-acceptance, and striving for a society that affords wholeness to its members are significant components of the religion of Jesus. Thurman enduringly challenges anyone who professes any religious creed to withdraw from daily busyness to center themselves in God's presence. Withdrawal yields renewal and resilience which empower adherents to choose a mystic path wherein one becomes one with God by exemplifying God's unfailing love for humankind. The religion of Jesus rests fundamentally upon the new law and ethic of love. In fulfillment of the Greatest Commandment, a mystic wholeheartedly loves God and their neighbor as much as they love themselves. A mystic conclusively progresses toward self-acceptance and self-realization within an interdependent relationship with God while striving for a just and equitable society that affords everyone a chance to attain the same.