Howard Thurman

by

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Howard Thurman’s work often goes unnoticed among names like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Iliff’s own Vincent Harding, but his influence was a quiet undercurrent in all these lives and his prophetic voice echoes through the decades all the same (Craddock 2012, 334). Notably, however, he did not identify as a theologian (Smith 1981, 43). His work was deliberately not systematic or organized the way one might expect a theologian’s to be, tackling such topics as the nature of God, soteriology, sin, and the Church. Instead, he identified as a mystic and his over twenty books bear such titles as *Meditations of the Heart*, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, *The Centering Moment*, and *The Search for Common Ground*. His enduring legacy is one of hope and community building based on shared spiritual experiences, which is as relevant today as it was in his context during the movement for black civil rights in the 1960s.

Howard Thurman was born on November 18 in Daytona, Florida, though the year is disputed –1899 or 1900, depending on the source. He was the son of a railroad worker, Saul Thurman, who died while Howard was seven, and Alice Ambrose Thurman. His early life and faith was shaped by his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, who spent a significant portion of her life in slavery (Craddock 2012, 334). Florida, and Daytona especially, was deeply segregated and Howard, a brilliant student, left his home town for Jacksonville to attend high school at Florida Baptist Academy, one of only three black high schools in the state (Fluker 2006, 2194).

Shortly after graduating as valedictorian, Thurman attended Morehouse College, where he met Martin Luther King Sr. (Fluker 2006, 2194). He would continue a lifelong friendship with the King family and become a mentor of Martin Luther King Jr. (Craddock 2012, 334). He continued his studies at Colgate-Rochester Theological Seminary and was ordained in the Baptist tradition (Craddock 2012, 335). He held several theology teaching positions over the course of his life and was inspired by interactions with his students (Smith 1981, 4).

In 1935, during his tenure at Howard College, traveled to India, Burma, and Ceylon as part of a “Pilgrimage of Friendship”. On this trip, Thurman met Gandhi and their friendship would shape both men as they worked for integration and equality in their respective contexts (Smith 2006, 20). Upon his return to the US, Thurman began to experiment with faith communities as an environment for integrated community building (Smith 1981, 6).

Though remaining part of academic institutions for most of his career, Thurman planted the first known interracial and interfaith congregation in 1944, The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, California (Craddock 2012, 335). He retired from Boston University in 1965, and spent the rest of his life creating and maintaining the Howard Thurman Educational Trust. He passed away from cancer in 1981 (Smith 2006, 25).

Thurman’s work carries central themes of mysticism, radical non-violence, authenticity, and community (Smith 2006, 29). His sense of spirituality was instilled by his grandmother and deepened by his time spent with Rufus Jones, a Quaker mystic, and Gandhi (Smith 1981). This direct experience of God was foundational to his work around resistance, authentic engagement, and community building, as he believed those rooted in God could encounter difference with hospitality and welcome. To him, this was the central narrative of the gospel and the strength of what he called The Religion of Jesus, which he distinguished from the institution of the Christian Church (Smith 1981, 5). His most famous book, Jesus and the Disinherited, reinterpreted the gospel from this perspective, encouraging the oppressed to engage in a spiritual life, which would center them in their own authentic identity and allow them to undermine their oppressors through a radically non-violent refusal of hatred and anger (Smith 2006, 28).

Though his context was explicitly Christian, Thurman’s writings point to an embodied experience of the love of a God which he believed was accessible to anyone through personal experience. By engaging with this love, he believed people could encounter their authentic selves, overcome prejudice, and accept the difference of others, enabling the spiritually engaged to form a non-violent, integrated community (Makechnie 1988, 3). His commitment to community building is a powerful example for those engaged in anti-oppresion work working to build interfaith coalitions today. His writings about the work of Jesus ring true today in a church seeking renewal, awakening to the fact that it has too often been on the side of the oppressor, despite its central teachings. It should be noted, though, that some of his writing smacks of “anonymous Christianity”, or the idea that all paths lead to the Christian God. Thurman wrote that those who are earnestly seeking God in their own faith contexts are truly Christians, regardless of their own faith claims, because they are living “the way of Jesus” (Smith 1981, 71). This outlook is a form of cultural imperialism, which should be handled carefully.

The current American cultural context is one of deep division over many identities, including race, gender, sexuality, and legal status. Howard Thurman’s life and work provide a blueprint for bringing people together that is still relevant to the work of activists and spiritual ministers alike as they dream of a better world and work to bring about the same Kingdom of God he dreamed of. His reclamation of spirituality and highlighting of the strength of the religion of Jesus in the context of interfaith relationships is a beautiful contribution to the work of theological construction and should be given the respect it is due.

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