

Howard Thurman's impact on postmodern liberation theology example #2



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“ Community cannot for long feed on itself; it can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond, their unknown and undiscovered brothers. ”

Howard Thurman, African American educator, theologian, *Search For Common Ground*, 1971. Using Jeremiah 17, Howard Thurman urges his listeners to find their security in God, not in the opinion of others. As Fluker and Tumber note, the denunciation of social elitism was an important theme throughout Thurman's career, particularly as he entered the realm of black society's elite at Howard.

When throughout his journey Thurman was confronted with the contradictions of Christianity within segregated society, he answered by distinguishing Christianity from the religion of Jesus. [1] Thurman's belief that the “ goal of the mystic ... is to know God in a comprehensive sense; ... the vision of God is realized inclusively. ” Establishing “ community” in Howard's closed cultural environment through inclusive worship practices is a lofty goal. [2] “ What does Jesus have to teach those with their backs up against the wall,” Fluker says. He teaches that the anatomy of fear and hate only leads to violence. He offers the vision of spiritual discipline against resentment. This was the moral basis of the nonviolent movement of the Black freedom movement in the South. “

Scholars say Thurman's real influence is on building community. “ Thurman is a significant figure in ecumenical movements,” says Thurman scholar, Luther E. Smith of Emory University and author of *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*. He speaks to what it means to have a community of Christians, Muslims and Buddhists living in the same community and finding ways to be tolerant of all religious views. The Thurman project seeks to

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recognize and utilize Thurman as we wrestle with these very difficult questions. " (Smith, 1992) From Howard Thurman we may learn that the Journey must deconstruct the separative categories of domination-over-nature that have been wedded to idealized patriarchy. Ideally, says contemporary patriarchy, nature is but a resource we " use.

Thurman deconstructs this assumption by establishing the mystical, theological, and cosmological commonality of all that exists. Seeking to assert the Community of All, Thurman's mystic vision of communion debunks categorical atomism, political separatism, and anti-ecological economics. A powerful deconstruction of homophobic maleness can be built upon this common foundation. Howard Thurman observed the cruel and destructive consequences of messages to people who are led to believe that " they don't count, they don't matter" when their life stories are not deemed worthy of hearing.

The social justice mission of the Catholic Church elaborated in its document are in harmony with the social justice mission as articulated by Black and Womanist liberation theologies. The distinguishing focus of postmodern liberation theology is the insistence that this mission needs to include the particular experience of Black people. These theologies also focus on the realities that divide the human community but place emphasis on those root dynamics at the heart of Black alienation and oppression within society, namely the social sins of racism, sexism, and classism.

Both the social justice mission at the heart of the Church and the social justice mission at the heart of Black and Womanist theologies is ultimately

directed toward liberation, the overcoming of the oppression of human division, and communion, the visible realization of full human communion. The writings of prolific activist theologians and spiritual leaders born and initially nurtured in the Black community during the 20th century like Howard Thurman gave this theology its strength.

His writings emphasize the continued centrality of community in the African American religious ethical tradition and the integral relationship of love, justice, and community within that tradition. Katie Cannon has correctly observed that " for Thurman everything moves toward community. " Although he offered distinct interpretations and application of the concepts of imago Dei, love, and justice, he argued that love and justice are to be ordered toward community.

He insisted that all men and women, including Black men and women, were made in the image and likeness of God who is the source and means of the inter-relatedness of all human beings. Luther Smith has summarized the essence of Thurman's theological ethics as follows: " Thurman's greatest legacy may be his vision of inclusive community: a community based on reconciliation, which recognizes and celebrates the underlying unity of life and the inter-dependence of all life forms.

Justice and a sense of innate equality are ruling principles for community, and love-ethic established and maintains the community's creative character. Person identity is affirmed while unity is sought with one's fellows. Thurman's inclusive community harbors all races, classes, faith claims and ethnic groups, for in the eyes of God, every human being is His beloved

child. Difference among people are not ignored or depreciated, though their importance does not overshadow the bond of kinship between individuals.

And because of this bond, difference can be appreciated rather than feared, for the variety of truth perspective they bring to understanding. In cultural pluralism persons come to know the many faces of God, and what God is doing in diverse ways. Hopefully, this will give individuals a proper sense of self and neighbor such that one does not fall into destructive righteousness, inclusive community confirms what Thurman understands as God's will for human relationships. As Cannon also observed, Thurman held that " mystical experience, love and community relatedness are part of the same continuum.

Inclusive community is nonspatial. It is qualitative. " Howard Thurman's role in the Civil Rights Movement, although public, was never essentially political; rather, it was a theological and ethical movement grounded in a notion of community quite similar to that of Mohanda Karamchand Gandhi, the Indian pacifist. Thurman's dream of the future for America and the world was expressed in his concept of " the beloved community," his metaphor for the achievement of a qualitatively inclusive community.

Thurman's creative activism involved three basic strategic principles " assessing the character and logistics of the situation; naming the primary evil to be dramatized; and identifying the meaning of non-cooperation with evil. " Thurman was outlining strategic principles for the achievement of political and civil rights, but the purpose of that achievement was ultimately

the establishment of an inclusive human community rooted in the Judeo-Christian love ethic.

Thurman once noted: “ It is true that as we struggle for freedom in America, we will have to boycott at times. But we must remember ... that a boycott is not an end in itself ... the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community. ” The writings of Howard Thurman are precursors of the liberation theology that would emerge in the late 1960s. His speech, writings, and actions demonstrate the integral relatedness of liberation and communion. He initially struggled for the liberation of oppressed Black people within the United States. He eventually expanded his concerns to include all oppressed people and their oppressors as their analysis and vision took on global dimensions. Until 1958, most U. S. Catholic bishops were silent and appeared indifferent to racism.

Even when some bishops took public stances against racist behavior, the majority of theologians and lay people persisted in their silence. Howard Thurman, as theologian and pastor, was the first prophetic voice that effectively challenged the Christian churches and the United States to confront their complicity with racial injustice. Thurman helped galvanize the prophetic anawim. Black Christian clergy and laity and attentive and committed White and Black members of predominately White churches, including Catholics, began to protest the racism that divided both Church and society.

Thurman welcomed all who were prepared to march and protest as a necessary prelude to the realization of his vision of the world as the beloved

community. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, Thurman attempted to confront the silent complicity of Christian theologians and the churches in the continued perpetuation of racism. His initial work called for a profound paradigm shift in theology as well as within ecclesial structures and social patterns of relationship. Such a shift required an examination of the limits of the prevailing interpretations of Christology and ecclesiology that had legitimized ecclesial and social “ American Apartheid.

The formal articulation of liberation theology emerged almost simultaneously on the North and South American continents in the writings of Thurman, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and shortly thereafter in his *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), as well as in the volume of Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). Interestingly, both these expressions of liberation theology began by challenging the interpretations about Jesus and the Church in the prevailing theologies of the period. Thus, the theologian took up his own “ quest for the historical Jesus.

Thurman began to reread the Bible and theological traditions from the perspective of the oppressed. Thurman gave emphasis to the plight of oppressed Blacks in the U. S. and focused on the oppressed indigenous peoples in Latin America. He discovered a Jesus who did not condone slavery or the devaluation and dehumanization of human beings. He discovered a Jesus who was God of the oppressed, a Liberator. In his search for the full meaning of the Bible and Christ for those whose existence is characterized by oppression, Thurman touched and embraced the profound mystery of Jesus' sojourn on earth.

He identified Jesus as the heart of Christian life and the gospel. For Thurman, Jesus Christ is the essence of the Gospel. For him, Jesus Christ is the center of God's salvific design. For Thurman, " Jesus is the Oppressed One whose task is that of liberating humanity from inhumanity. Through him the oppressed are set free, to be what they are. "[10] For him, "[t]he work of Christ ... a new creation ... is presented simultaneously as a liberation from sin and from all its consequences; despoliation, injustice and hatred. "

Both acknowledged Jesus' option for the poor. He was" declared Thurman, " for the poor and against the rich, for the weak and against the strong. "

Thurman wrote: " Jesus accompanied this criticism with a head-on opposition to the rich and powerful and a radical option for the poor. " The theologian sees contemporary liberation movements as a central aspect of the mission and meaning of Jesus Christ. According to Thurman: " The life, death and resurrection of Jesus reveal that he is the man for others, disclosing to them what is necessary for their liberation from oppression.

If this is true, then Christ must be black with black people so they can know that their liberation is His liberation. " he further insists: " All the dynamism of the cosmos and of human history [is] the movement towards creation of a more just and fraternal world. The overcoming of social inequalities among men, the efforts so urgently needed on our continent, to liberate man from all that depersonalizes him, physical and moral misery, ignorance and hunger, as well as the awareness of human dignity ... all these originate and are transformed and reach their perfection in the saving work of Christ.

Thurman sees the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the central mystery of Christian life, a mystery that calls for the profound and salvific transformation of the oppressed from their stated of dehumanized oppression to a new creature as human beings. Thurman writes: " His death is the revelation of the freedom of God, taking upon himself the totality of human oppression; his resurrection is the disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression but is transforms it into the possibility of freedom. He affirms that " the center of God's salvific design is Jesus Christ who by his death and resurrection transforms the universe and makes it possible for man to reach fulfillment as a human being. The redemptive action of Christ, the foundation of all that exists, is also conceived as recreation. " Although the Christological perspective of the theological pioneer is analogous, his work was received differently in the U. S. Catholic theological community. In the earliest reviews of their work only two Catholic critics engaged his texts.

The reviewer in the Journal of Religious Thought addressed Thurman's second book, A Black Theology of Liberation and identified Thurman's approach as extreme. The reviewer correctly asserted however the necessity of an authentic Black theology to be rooted in the indigenous art and thought forms found in the Black community but failed to acknowledge Thurman's social location as an authenticating source for his views. Using loaded rhetorical phrases such as " the simplistic nature of his analysis," the reviewer seems to challenge his intelligence and his authenticity.

Indeed, the reviewer comes perilously close to personal attack in concluding:

" such a `Black theology' ... [b]ecomes possible only when a Negro

intelligentsia has arisen [and has] become alienated from the living context
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of the black community. " On the other hand, another reviewer of Thurman's Theology of Liberation in the Jesuit weekly America applauded his attempt " to explore the relation between the redemptive work of Christ, of the Church, and movements for liberation of men from oppressive and dehumanizing conditions. "

Thurman has challenged Catholics who are concerned about justice regarding their indifference and silence on racism and their lack of knowledge about Black history and culture. He has been equally critical about their lack of interest in Black theology. The majority of ethnic European American Catholic theologians men and women have failed to engage the Black liberation theology that emerged over 30 years ago in the U. S. Even many of the theology departments and seminaries that teach other forms of liberation theology, such as Latin American, Feminist, Latino/Latina, African omit U. S. Black theology of liberation from their curricula and syllabi.

Thurman noted many years ago that this omission of the Black experience suggests " the black experience is not and has never been regarded as essential to the life and work of the church. " The silence of most Catholic theologians on the issue of racism and the U. S. Black theology of liberation, in contrast to the number of Catholic theologians who engage and teach the theology of Thurman and other liberation theologians in Latin America speaks volumes.

Bryan Massingale in his contribution to this theology looks closely at the publications of the U. S. Catholic bishops in the light of Thurman's writings.

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But how does one explain the collective and loud silence of American Catholic theologians? The annual proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America from 1946 to 1972 produced only two references to race as a moral issue. Even the “Notes on Moral Theology” published from 1940 to 1993 in *Theological Studies* produced similarly meager results.

This silence is astonishing in a country in which the “Negro problem” dominated the first-quarter of the 20th century, a country in which racism and its negative impact on Black life and freedom was so dramatically challenged during the Civil Rights Movement in the third-quarter of that same century. Until the recent emergence of Black Catholic and Protestant theologians and ethicists, as well as other liberation theologians, with a few exceptions, the theological academy has failed to acknowledge or discuss and develop a moral argument against racism as a moral issue and social sin.

Why has Thurman's work and the subsequent work of Black and Womanist theologies of liberation been ignored by most theological scholars? Why are so many moral, systematic, biblical, and moral theologians mute about the contradiction between our theological traditions and the racism that is embedded in our national psyche and institutional patterns? Why do liberal, contextual, and global theologians often overlook the racism that permeates the U. S. and world reality? Are we suffering from a hardness of heart that blinds us and makes us deaf to the implications of the way and teachings of Jesus within our own local and global context? You shall indeed hear but not understand, you shall indeed look but never see.

Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and be converted and I heal them" (Matthew 13: 14-15). Massingale suggests that the White tendency to treat Blacks as objects of White study, analysis, and charity rather than subjects capable of independent action or creative initiative has inhibited the recognition of Black agency and the possibility of engagement of Blacks in moral discourse. Thurman submits three reasons for this pattern of omission and neglect of racism as sin. First, he locates a problem with the prevailing methodological assumptions of moral theology that equate Christian ethics with human ethics. In its effort to demonstrate that Christian ethics and human ethics are basically the same, too often Christian ethics is collapsed into an abstract and unhistorical understanding of humanity so that our concrete and particular beliefs have little or no impact on moral thinking. Once Christian ethics has been made so abstract and unhistorical, moral theology loses all sight of the concrete and particular.

Second, Thurman argues that American ethics and moral theology have failed to engage African Americans about their experience of racism, they have rendered themselves incapable of generating an ethics of justice that moves beyond enlightened self-interest. As such, American Catholic ethics fail to recognize the limitations, bias and self-deception that creeps into so much of what ethicists take for granted. Third, American ethics and moral theology neglect the Black experience because it is marked by " too much fantasy and not enough reverence and repentance. " Thurman uses the definition fantasy provided by Iris Murdoch.

Accordingly, fantasy is a distortion of moral vision based on a chronic misreading of the world and other people precisely because to see them truthfully would challenge us to conversion. Persistence in ethical fantasy prohibits one's vision and actions from being truthful. Thurman develops the concept of bias that is related to the concept of fantasy used in his analysis. He argues that the notion of intellectual bias provides a rational explanation of the silence and lack of solidarity for liberation on the part of many theologians from the dominant culture in the U. S. [In]difference, ignorance, egotism and selfishness are the obstacles to solidarity.

We must push past our own personal indifference, ignorance, egoism and the selfishness of our society. These obstacles to solidarity can be understood comprehensively as failures in authentic religious, intellectual, and moral living they can be expressed compactly as bias. By bias, I do not mean unswerving commitment to personal preference in the face of contrary and contradictory evidence; nor do I refer to personal temperament. Rather, by bias I mean the more or less conscious decision to refuse corrective insights or understandings, to persist in error.

Bias, then is the arrogant choice to be incorrect. Thus anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, homophobia, class exploitation, and cultural imperialism, are explicit concrete forms of individual and group bias.... Moreover, [these instances of bias] are forms of consciousness that, at once sustain the hegemony of the patriarchal, white supremacist ordering of the society in which we live, and undermine our efforts, to critique the consciousness, to participate in the person and social transformation and thus move authentically beyond mere rhetoric about solidarity. [23] Thurman's analysis implies at least that silence
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about a particular issue or question in fact represents an active, intentional choice and statement about an issue. Thurman's arguments conclude that the silence of U. S. Catholic theologians about racism is parallel to the silence of leading German theologians and intellectuals during the Nazi atrocities and prosecution of the so-called "final solution" against Jewish people. The theologians' failure to engage the experience and thought of Black people in America is, parallel to the failure of German theologians and philosophers to engage the experience and thought of the Jewish people.

I agree with Thurman in this concept as I share his belief that the end result of economic and social racism is just as strong as that expressed by physical means. However, this view may well not be shared with Germans who believe that their reaction in the Nazi period was either consistent with the common view (a safety shield) or covert due to the dangerous times in which they lived.

Examining the meaning and mission of the Church from the perspective of Black liberation theology can both strengthen and challenge the theological understanding of "communion. Black liberation ecclesiology, according to Thurman, insists that "the Church is that people called into being by the power and love of God to share in his revolutionary activity for the liberation of man.... The Church ... consists of people who have been seized by the Holy Spirit and who have the determination to live as if all depends on God. It has no will of its own, only God's will; it has no duty of its own, only God's duty. Its existence is grounded in God. "[24] Therefore, the Church of Christ is not bounded by standards of race, class, or occupation.

The Black liberation ecclesiology of James Thurman has emphasized that the Church as the Body of Christ must exhibit five characteristics: it must suffer with the suffering; it must proclaim the kerygma of liberation to Blacks—and other oppressed peoples and nations—as the liberating message of God's reign, confronting the world with the reality of Christian freedom; it must join in the struggle for liberation against the political, economic and social systems that contradict the Good News of Jesus liberating activity; it must be in its own community what it preaches and what it seeks to accomplish in the world, it must be a visible manifestation that the gospel is a reality; and it must challenge both Black and White churches to refute the dehumanization of Blacks and all oppressed peoples in their own communities as they struggle with them to obtain full freedom and equality in the society. As his conversations with womanists, feminists, and other liberation theologians from other cultural contexts such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia multiplied, so Thurman's understanding of the liberating mission of the Church expanded.

His understanding began to embrace not only the Black victims of racial oppression, but also the victims of gender, cultural and class oppression within both the Black and White Protestant and Catholic congregations. Thurman had always understood that the Church must be on the side of the poor, because Jesus was for the poor but his understanding of the poor in his later thought has embraced not only the Black poor in the U. S. but the poor all over the world. His Black, Asian, and Hispanic women students and their friends and associates at Union Theological Seminary were among the first

articulators of womanist, mujerista, and Asian women's liberation theologies in the U. S.

As he deepened their social and theological analysis of racial oppression, they made him more cognizant of the oppression of the distinct nature of the oppression of Black, Hispanic, and Asian in Church and society. Thurman's most recent essays on Black theology and the Black Church continue to challenge the Black churches to embrace both the demand of being agents of liberation and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The broadening of the horizons of Black liberation theology and the realization that the whole world is caught up in one dynamic struggle between estranged members of one culturally diverse human family, has led to understanding the relationship between the diverse forms of liberation theology within and beyond the U. S.

This helps us to understand that we are seeking liberation from oppressive divisions in the human community and liberation for a new or beloved community that embraces all into one communion under God. As I conclude my research, I am of the opinion that the Black Church has not done enough to realize Thurman's worldview and ideal, regardless of the fact that the roadmap is clearly laid out. I would continue to say that the Black Church has stalled at the step of implementation. However, there is a school of thought that believes that the Black Church has come a long way. Certainly this will leave the discourse and action plan open for years to come.