

BOOK REVIEW: HOWARD THURMAN'S PHILOSOPHICAL MYSTICISM

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Meeting an African American Philosophical Mystic

The African American religious thinker Howard Thurman (1899–1981) has been receiving attention of late with the release of a PBS documentary “Backs Against the Wall” which focuses upon Thurman’s 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and his influence on the Civil Rights Movement. Some recent books have also focused on Thurman, including Gary Dorrien’s 2018 study *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King and the Black Social Gospel*. In Dorrien’s account, the Black Social Gospel movement began in the 1920’s and taught a non-fundamentalist liberal theology using the findings of science and Biblical criticism. Black Social Gospel saw God as immanent in human activity rather than as only other-worldly, and it focused on the improvement of social conditions of the racially marginalized poor, oppressed, and downtrodden. Dorrien’s book studies the Black Social Gospel movement through six important figures, including Thurman. Dorrien’s treatment of Thurman leapt out at me. I became fascinated with Thurman’s combination of mysticism and social activism. Dorrien quotes the following words of Thurman from late in his life: “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive” (Dorrien 162). Dorrien’s book inspired me to explore Thurman for myself and to read this new book by Anthony Sean Neal, Assistant professor of philosophy at Mississippi State University, on Thurman, the aptly titled *Howard Thurman’s Philosophical Mysticism: Love Against Fragmentation*. Neal’s book might be read as a commentary on the above words from Thurman as it explores what Thurman might mean by “people who have come alive”.

Some background may be appropriate for those approaching Thurman for the first time. Thurman left a great deal of information about his life in his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, published two years before his death. Thurman spent his childhood in the heavily segregated community of Daytona, Florida and was heavily influenced by the religious spirit of his grandmother, a former slave. Thurman’s intellectual

ability was recognized early, and he left home to attend high school in Jacksonville. Thurman graduated as valedictorian both from high school and from Morehouse College and then graduated in 1926 as valedictorian from the Rochester Theological Union. He studied philosophy for a summer at Columbia University and became influenced by the works of John Dewey at a time when Dewey was in Japan. In 1929, Thurman studied as a special student with the Quaker philosopher and mystic Rufus Jones at Haverford University. Jones' mystical philosophy also deeply influenced Thurman.

From 1932–1944, Thurman served as the first Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University. During this time, he travelled to India and met Gandhi. In 1953, Thurman became Dean of Marsh Chapel and Professor of Theology at Boston University and served in this position until 1965. But it is the position Thurman held between his appointments at Howard and Boston University that is most revealing. In 1944, Thurman left his tenured position at Howard to become the co-founder and pastor of the Church of the Fellowship of all Peoples in San Francisco. This was the first inter-racial, inter-faith, and intercultural house of worship in the United States. It aimed at a broad ecumenicism by welcoming and learning from people of all races and religions without asking any participant to give up his or her prior identities or religious commitments. Thurman became known for his sermons and meditations and for the creativity he encouraged in forms of worship. Thurman did not publish his first book until 1944. He would ultimately write 22 books, with his 1949 work *Jesus and the Disinherited* still the best-known.

In his book, Neal offers a scholarly exposition of Thurman as a philosopher together with a discussion of why Thurman's philosophy is worth knowing. Neal's book weaves together two threads. First, Neal states that his goal is the better understanding of the experience of blackness in American society. He approaches Thurman to understand Thurman's response to being black at what Neal terms the beginning of the Modern Era of the African American Freedom Struggle, (1896–

1975). Second, Neal argues that Thurman's experience of his blackness with its loneliness, rejection, and objectification resulted in a "fragmentation" of Thurman from himself, from others, and from the world. Thurman's blackness together with his reflections on his experience led him to a mystical philosophy which stressed the underlying unity and interconnectedness of all reality in God and to the fulfillment of the potential of each individual in community.

In his study, Neal relies on the body of Thurman's published writings as well as on unpublished writings, sermons, and lectures. He finds three of Thurman's books, together with the autobiography, philosophically significant in giving an understanding of the breadth and purpose of Thurman's thinking.

The first of these books is *Jesus and the Disinherited* which arose from a challenge Thurman received from a Hindu sage when he visited India in the mid-1930s. Thurman was asked to explain how he could be devoted to Christianity as the dominant religion in a country where African Americans were mistreated and marginalized. Thurman replied by distinguishing between the religion of Jesus and much present-day Christianity. As Neal writes, for Thurman "the religion of Jesus was not an abstract myth, it was a religious movement, which developed in a historical context. In this context, the subject of the text was himself a member of the underprivileged, the disinherited" (28). With its emphasis on the religion of Jesus as a religion of the disinherited rather than of the privileged, Neal sees Thurman as a predecessor of the black theology movement associated with James Cone.

The second book is Thurman's 1963 *Disciplines of the Spirit*. This short book consists of five dense chapters in which Thurman studied broad aspects of human experience he deemed universal and of special value for teaching the human spirit in its understanding of God: commitment, growth, suffering, prayer, and reconciliation. Neal stresses the mystical, universalizing character of this book. He writes:

For Thurman, this is a living world, there is also commonality stemming from the agent of life, and this agent is also alive. This agent, which has its origin in God, is expressed in all things that are living. These premises are quite common to many, who can be thought of as mystics, but Thurman extends this line of reasoning to include the realization of the unity or commonness in all living things as they actualize their full potential. Thurman basis his acceptance of the fundamental unity of living things in the observation of the rhythm or repetition of basic patterns within all living things. For Thurman, living things begin to pursue their potential from a desire towards unity. Once unity is reach(ed), the living entities are now able to fully actualize their potential (39).

The third and most important of Thurman's philosophical writings is *The Search for Common Ground* (1971) which Thurman described as his "lifelong working paper". In this short, spare book, Thurman set forth his quest, as a lonely, fragmented, and finite individual to find unity and wholeness in life through understanding his relationship to other persons in community and, more broadly, to the whole of reality. Neal finds that the book explores how a "common ground of existence subsists and is what causes the interconnectedness between all things, especially that which is living" (39). Neal continues:

This idea of interconnectedness is also a result of Thurman's belief that the pinnacle of human existence is in human community...Therefore, it can be inferred, that it is counter to the aim of life for that which resides at the highest tier of life (human community or humans in community) to also be destructive to life (i.e. war). Simply put, the highest tier should stand the best possibility for the continuation of life and the God Vision (which is simply to see as God sees), which is given, if the

goal of unity is to actualize full potential.

In the four chapters of his book, Neal offers a variety of perspectives on the relationship between the two poles of Thurman's philosophy: his experience as a black individual living in a frequently hostile white society on the one hand and his quest to resolve his sense of fragmentation through love, human community and a sense of the unity of being on the other hand. Thus, in the first chapter, Neal develops the black sources of Thurman's thought in, for example, his relationship with Grandma Nancy, his research on Negro Spirituals, and his interest in Africa. Thurman used his experiences as an African American to delve for a deeper meaning through the use of symbols which led him to conclude that his experiences could best be understood when viewed from the aspect of an interconnected total reality, as in Neoplatonism.

In the book's second chapter, "Creatively Encountering Oneness", Neal makes his case for Thurman as a systematic philosopher. Neal develops and defends what he sees as Thurman's "mystical logic" which sees intuition as a philosophically legitimate means of understanding the basic totality and interrelatedness of being. Neal draws on sources including Neoplatonism, Spinoza, and Bergson which he combines with Thurman's own *The Search for Common Ground* and other writings.

Neal's third chapter "Deepening the Hunger" explores Thurman's meditations and poems and their relationship to his more overtly philosophical works. Neal offers an extended discussion of the relationship between reason and imagination which culminates in a study of Richard Rorty's view that philosophy may be viewed as a form of poetry. Neal argues that Thurman's intuitive approach to unity and interrelatedness works within the realm of imagination which, as the Romantics and Rorty suggest, has a priority to the use of discursive reason. Neal studies several of Thurman's poetic meditations to suggest how they enhance the mystical philosophy Thurman develops in his more systematic writings.

The study's fourth chapter, "Intrinsic Love" discusses, as indicated by the book's subtitle, how Thurman understood "Love against Fragmentation". Neal draws from a range of Thurman's writings including *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in which Thurman developed the "love ethic" of Jesus, a 1961 essay, "Mysticism and the Experience of Love" and *The Search for Common Ground*, with its quest for community and wholeness. Intrinsic love, for Thurman, is the tie that binds people to one another and to act to promote each other's welfare in family, community, and nature. Neal again stresses that Thurman's understanding of the unifying power of love arose from Thurman's experience of blackness and of the nature of black experience in a society plagued by racism. Neal acknowledges the important and in part contrarian nature of Thurman's stress on love and interdependency at a time when many in the African American community were advocating separatism. Neal perceptively concludes that:

Thurman quite reasonably desires to move beyond the blackness lens to the human lens of 'universal' life or being/oneness. It's not that he dislikes his own skin but that he desires more to be one with the ALL. The Modern Era's production of scars on his soul may be contributed to his writing in such a manner, just as he commented that the first twenty-three years of his life were affected in such a manner (83).

Although the writing is frequently awkward, Neal succeeds in his goal of showing Thurman's importance as a philosopher. I was especially moved the passion Neal shows for his subject. This book is valuable for readers interested in African American philosophy. Even more so, the book serves as a reminder of the breadth and variety of living philosophical approaches in the United States, including a broadly holistic approach based on philosophical mysticism.