The Undiscovered Thurman: The Early Howard Thurman and the Religious Left's Unfinished Business of Race Relations

by

Larry S. Perry, II
Timonium, Maryland

Bachelor of Arts, Fisk University, 2007
Master of Divinity, Union Theological Seminary, 2010
Master of Arts, University of Virginia, 2013

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For Mom and Dad, the greatest parents I could have.

Introduction

> Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk.
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> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," 1841

> I've seen black musicians when they'd be jamming at a jam session. . . . that black musician, he picks up his horn and starts blowing some sounds that he never thought of before. He improvises, he creates, it comes from within. It's his soul, it's that soul music. It's the only area on the American scene where the black man has been free to create. And he has mastered it. He has shown that he can come up with something that nobody ever thought of on his horn. . . . likewise he can do the same thing if given intellectual independence. He can come up with a new philosophy. He can come up with a philosophy nobody has heard of yet. . . . He will improvise; he'll bring it from within himself.
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> —Malcolm X, *Organization for Afro-American Unity Founding Rally*, Audubon Ballroom, 1964

This dissertation presents an intellectual and political biography of the early life of 20th century philosopher, mystic, minister, and activist, Howard Thurman.[1] Intentionally included in the biography is a description of the numerous circumstances, institutions, and social and cultural factors that produced him. A detailed account of the early life of Howard Thurman, and the world around him, points toward a more politically radical and philosophically and theologically robust account than the popularized post-1949 view. Howard Thurman's post-1949 publications—such as *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), *Meditations of the Heart* (1953), and *A Search for Common Ground* (1971)—are the meditations of a more conservative scholar and preacher. Ultimately, the younger and more politically radical Thurman calls us to reimagine American intellectualism and liberal religiosity as tools in the struggle for social justice and the hope of racial equality.

[1]The title of this dissertation, "The Undiscovered Thurman," is largely indebted to the mentorship of Melvin Rogers of the University of Los Angeles. In his work, *The Undiscovered Dewey*, he sought to find what was *undiscovered* about John Dewey. Likewise, he encouraged me long ago, to find what was *undiscovered* about Howard Thurman.

This dissertation traces Thurman's intellectual, religious, and political evolution and maturation. Here, I seek to identify various sources—experiences, institutions, professors, activists, and their respective organizations—that informed Thurman as an intellectual and a minister. My pinpointing of the resources from which Thurman gleaned is an effort to fill a broad gap in Thurman scholarship particularly and American intellectual history more broadly. Instead of exploring the realities that shaped Howard Thurman, most scholarly works have presented a de-historicized figure that seems to appear out of thin air. In contrast, however, the historian asks the following questions: (1) What were the political and religious imperatives to which Thurman reacted? (2) From what intellectual streams did Thurman drink deeply? and (3) Who was Thurman among his many intellectual and religious peers? Failure to engage these questions has left a void in intellectual history, the history of the American religious left, African American religious history, and Thurman scholarship.

Thurman and His Readers

The paucity of scholarship on the pre-1949 Thurman calls for a more thorough analysis of Thurman's early life and works as well as a careful placing of Thurman among his peers. Delving further into his early work and his world expands our view of American religious history during this period. Detailed investigation of the first 49 years of Thurman's life also gives a more accurate view of Howard Thurman and his significance for the field of religious studies.

To date, only four full-length books have been written about Thurman: Luther Smith's *Howard Thurman: Mystic as Prophet* (1991); Walter Fluker's *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1990); Alton Pollard's *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of*

Howard Thurman (1992); and Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt's *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Trip to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (2009).[2] The first three of these works represent the first generation of Thurman scholarship. These scholars focused on the ethical dimensions of Howard Thurman's life and work. Each rejected the idea that his mysticism was a form of escapism. Importantly, this generation of scholars discussed Thurman's mysticism as a way for him to grapple with the temporal world and its tragic realities. Although their books greatly contributed to the Thurman project, they failed to examine Howard Thurman's thoughts from a wide historical perspective. Thus, these scholars neglected Thurman's significant years before writing *Jesus and the Disinherited* and his role in shaping liberal religion.

Luther Smith's work pushed the Thurman project toward a socially engaged mysticism. Specifically, Smith identified Thurman's mysticism as prophetic provocation toward inclusive community and analyzed four major influences on Thurman's life: Nancy Ambrose, George Cross, Henry Robbins, and Rufus Jones.[3] Unfortunately, much like his portrait of Thurman, Smith wrote about these people without considering the institutions, communities, traditions, and historical moments to which they belonged.

Walter Fluker juxtaposed Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr., placing great emphasis on the ethical good each man taught about community.[4] Fluker's work reduced

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[2]Luther Smith, *Howard Thurman: Mystic as Prophet*, (Richmond: Friends United Press; First Edition, 1991); Walter Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989); Alton B. Pollard, II, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang Academic Publishers, 1992); Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Trip to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

[3] Smith, *Howard Thurman: Mystic as Prophet*, 20-21.

[4]Fluker, *They Looked for a City*, xi.

Thurman's important historical narrative to a theoretical conversation with Martin Luther King, Jr. While the imagined conversation between these two men is interesting for theologians, it holds less interest for those seeking to understand American religious liberalism and African American religious history, appropriate contexts for a more complete understanding of both men's significance. Questioning Fluker's use of Thurman in relation to King makes sense for two reasons: (1) there is scant evidence that the two had anything approximating a close relationship; and (2) King's imposing presence diminishes Thurman's to the point that Thurman only appears to matter in relation to King.

In contrast, Alton Pollard argued that Howard Thurman had a far greater "role as an actor and agent for change in the twentieth century."[5] Unlike the other first generation Thurman scholars, Pollard used the tools of sociology, phenomenology, and history to analyze Thurman's work. Pollard insightfully interpreted Thurman's work in light of Max Weber and other theorists. Pollard's account focused on Howard Thurman after 1949, especially Thurman's work at Fellowship Church and Boston University, while glossing over major parts of Thurman's pre-1949 formation.

Although Smith, Fluker, and Pollard brought to light significant details that facilitate an understanding of the post-1949 views of Thurman, they failed to help readers understand Thurman's historical context or his significance in relation to African American life in the first half of the 20th century and the growth of liberal religion. Specifically, these studies did not examine the influence of his grandmother, academic mentors, and contemporary intellectuals. Moreover, watershed moments of Thurman's life—his Southern rearing, Morehouse College

[5]Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change*, xi.

years, Rochester Seminary studies, Haverford education, and Howard University deanship—became mere afterthoughts, skipped hastily in order to discuss his later life. The authors' reluctance to engage the early life and views of Howard Thurman may well have been obstructed by lack of access to Thurman's papers. In 2009, over 20 years after the first scholarly studies of Thurman, University of South Carolina Press published the first volume of the Thurman Papers collection.[6] The first three volumes are now in print, allowing for a complete study of Thurman's early life and work.

Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt's *Visions of a Better World*, the fourth major study of Howard Thurman, has been the only one to provide both a historical account of his life and attention to his early work. The authors' primary focus, however, was on Thurman's trip to India in 1935. They did not rigorously investigate Thurman's intellectual genealogy nor contextualize his thoughts in relation to those of scholars of race and religion at the time. Especially thin was their treatment of Thurman's Rochester and Haverford education when he studied pragmatism and the social gospel, and his Howard University Chapel deanship when his voice differed radically from his faculty colleagues.

Howard Thurman and the American Religious Left

This dissertation highlights Thurman's involvement with the American religious left's organizations and institutions—a subject rarely explored because scholars have primarily identified liberal religion with white religious figures. The sources show that Thurman recreated

[6] Walter E. Fluker eds., *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume 1: My People Need Me* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2009); *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume 2: Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2012); *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume 3: The Bold Adventure* (University of South Carolina Press, 2015); Hereafter cited as *Thurman Papers.*

American liberal religion to meet the challenges of his experiences as a black person in America. In Thurman's hands, the politics and intellectualism of the American religious left became something profoundly different because of his analysis and critique of modern life and a stated hope for racial equality. As I will show in what follows, the mysticism, philosophy, and theology of the color-blind liberal Rufus Jones became something different in the hands of the racially oppressed Howard Thurman. Moreover, Thurman's social location matters because he used the tools of religious liberalism to articulate the truths of his black experience.

Howard Thurman—more than any of his theological contemporaries, black or white—cut a unique path that led to an intersection between black and white academic and religious institutions. From his college days until the 1940s, Thurman's racially heterogeneous life placed him in black (Morehouse College, Howard University, and the Fellowship of Religious Workers) as well as white (Fellowship for Reconciliation, Rochester Seminary, Student Fellowship for Student Life-Service, and Haverford College) social and academic spaces.[7] In each of these circles, Thurman never sought to deemphasize his religious liberalism nor did he seek to avoid difficult racial conversations. Viewing Howard Thurman through this racially complex lens expands and complicates the religious left's politics and practices.

Thurman's story is important especially when considered in concert with the history and historiography of the American religious left. The religious left has had brief moments when it took a multi-racial turn. However, a historian of the religious left has yet to produce a book that

[7] The Fellowship of Religious Workers on the Campuses of Negro Colleges and Universities consisted of 25 professors, students, chapel deans, and other administrators on historically black college and university campuses. The group attempted to influence how those on black college campuses thought about and discussed religion. Among the group members were: Howard University Chapel dean Howard Thurman, Howard University president Mordecai Johnson, Howard Divinity School dean William Stuart Nelson, and Lincoln University Chapel dean Frank Wilson, the Fellowship's president. This group gathered to discuss topics such as religion and social change, the role of black churches, and the role of black colleges in building leaders.

places black figures at its center. Major monographs, such as Ralph Luker's *The Social Gospel in Black and White*, Dan McKanan's *Prophetic Encounters*, Leigh Schmidt's *Restless Souls*, and Gary Dorrien's *The Making of American Liberal Theology* trilogy, evidence the historiographical turn toward multi-racial and dual-gendered pictures of America's religious liberal wing.[8] Further, these books tell of the multi-racial evolution of American liberal religious historiography, from its origins found in William R. Hutchison's whitewashed *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*.[9] This dissertation's portrait of the early Thurman attempts to read Thurman's work within and against the narratives rendered by historians of the American religious left.

Scholars, such as Donald Meyer, Heather Warren, Richard Wightman Fox, Matthew Hedstrom, and Joseph Kip Kosek, have distilled the historical significance of mostly white religious leftists during the 1930s and 1940s.[10] These narratives delineate the various stories of liberal religious actors, among them Reinhold Niebuhr, Henry P. Van Deusen, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Paul Tillich, and A. J. Muste. However, these narratives miss black religious liberals such as Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, Vernon Johns, and Mordecai Johnson, who emerged in the same era as these white liberals' peers and number within several of their associations.

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[8] Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform 1885–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Dan McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011); Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001-2005).

[9] William Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

[10] Examples of these authors' contribution to the historiography of American religious liberalism can be found in: Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965); Heather Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornel University Press, 1985); Matthew Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Retrieving these black religious figures allows us to see them molding religious liberalism in the power of their own religious and political genius.

Accordingly, this dissertation examines Howard Thurman's relationship and role within predominantly white religious leftist organizations, particularly the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Study of Thurman's involvement in these organizations shows him developing a unique pacifism. While he agreed with pacifist ideals, he also critiqued the color-dismissive politics he observed among many white pacifists. Thurman's color-concerned politics distinguishes him from Rufus Jones, the Quaker mystic and noted Haverford professor, thus creating a counter narrative to historian Leigh Schmidt who views Jones's and Thurman's racial politics as one and the same.[11]

African American Religious History and Howard Thurman

This study of the early life and religious thought of Howard Thurman expands the narratives rendered in African American religious history. Thurman's place among white religious liberals and his movement toward religious promiscuity makes him a hard fit for most depictions of black religiosity. Indeed, Thurman's involvement with such associations as the FOR and Fellowship Church places him outside black churches, the most dominant setting in the study of African American religion. Thurman's leaving black churches and creating a religious space for himself among liberal religious institutions pushes African American religious historians to take seriously figures who found a religious home apart from black institutions.

[11]Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 267-268.

Beginning with W. E. B. Du Bois in the early 20th century to Wallace Best in the 21st century, scholars have made great strides in studying black churches. Historian Barbara Savage asserted in *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* that early black religion scholars sought to diagnose the problems of black churches.[12] The first generation of scholars of African American churches—Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, and Benjamin E. Mays—argued that black churches were too concerned with their members becoming heaven bound to be of any earthly good.[13] The second generation—Albert Raboteau, Lewis Baldwin, Gayraud Wilmore, C. Eric Lincoln, and Vincent Harding—endeavored to find meaning in black churches rather than point out their alleged shortcomings.[14] In the cases of Wilmore and Lincoln, articulating the meaning behind the religious life of black churches, became an apologia of what they called "the black church." Here, they painted black churches as politically radical public spaces. Ironically, Wilmore and Lincoln made these claims even as black televangelism arose, providing glaring evidence that black churches were hardly bastions of black radical politics. Current scholars—Barbara Savage, Wallace Best, and Anthea Butler—have found, like the second generation before them, that black churches hold a particular importance for black communities.[15] This

[12]Barbara Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[13] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Dover Books, 1903); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1964); Benjamin Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933).

[14]Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Lewis V. Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); E. Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America/The Black Church Since Frazier* (Berlin: Schoken Books, 1974); Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981).

[15]Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*; Wallace Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Anthea Butler, *Women in The Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

generation has defined the importance of black churches while identifying the diversity within black churches. Thus they complicate and dispel the mythical monolith of "the black church."

Few works by African American religious historians have gone beyond black churches and other black religious institutions to study black religious figures. Judith Weisenfeld in *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA* and Anthony Pinn in his several works have brought to light rare instances in which black religiosity exists beyond black churches.[16] For example, in *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism*, Pinn highlights the work of black non-theistic humanists. Readers are pointed toward black atheists and black church skeptics who abandoned theism and black religious institutions in favor of non-theistic humanist religion to inform their progressive politics. If one accepts Pinn's claim which extends black religiosity beyond black churches, one might expect to find that black spiritual strivings and progressive religious politics existed elsewhere and not only in black churches.

I assert that such places were found by what I call the black Spiritual Left: African Americans who held liberal religious inclinations while not attending black churches. Much like Leigh Schmidt's portrait of the Spiritual left in *Restless Souls*, the black Spiritual Left threw off the "'corpses' of institutions, traditions, and forms."[17] Furthermore, these were people who, as Walt Whitman said, sought "the divine ideas of spirituality" where "all religions . . . [were] but temporary journeys."[18] This dissertation will make sense of Howard Thurman's leaving black churches by reading his actions through the lens of black leftist spirituality. Thurman's absence

[16]Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Anthony Pinn, *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
[17]Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 4.
[18] Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 4.

from black churches spoke to the overall state of black churches, an institution which Du Bois once called "the social [center] of Negro life in the United States."[19] When viewing black churches as a "social center," Thurman and other mid-20th century black intellectuals' flight from black churches was not their attempt to follow the Whitmanian line of shunning religious dogma or institutional "corpses." On the contrary, Thurman and his peers were re-creating their faith and politics to grapple properly with modernity and American racism. Indeed, Thurman and his peers reimagined their religious politics to contend with poverty, racism, sexism, and violence.[20]

Religious anthropologist Marla Fredrick may be right when she says that studies of figures such as Howard Thurman do not tell us much about the on-goings of black churches as black public spaces.[21] However, closer study of the early Thurman and his peers tells us much more about their connection, or lack thereof, with black churches. Thurman, like others of the black intelligentsia during the 1930s and '40s, represented a segment of blacks who purposefully removed themselves from black churches. These artists, activists, and academics converted to atheism, agnosticism, or embraced forms of liberal spirituality. By reading the work of Howard Thurman and his black contemporaries who took up liberal spirituality in light of the development of a black Spiritual Left, this dissertation expands the study of black religiosity which has mostly focused on black Evangelical Protestantism.

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[19] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Dover Books, Kindle Edition, 2010), 91.

[20] Ethicist Victor Anderson in *Beyond Ontological Blackness* has stated that Thurman called for a transcending of tragedy and its manifestations such as sexism, racism and violence. Further, Anderson painted Thurman as holding a utopian view in which racism and other forms of division were merely lines in society one ought to ignore. This dissertation argues that the early Thurman held a religious stance which sought to bear witness to and bridge societal fault lines.

[21] Marla Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2003), 18.

Thurman and American Intellectual History

This dissertation engages the field of American intellectual history by locating Thurman within the contexts of an intellectual movement and his intellectual genealogy. This approach allows readers to understand Thurman's place in American intellectual history and the sources that influenced him. I gain such information chiefly from Thurman's student papers, articles, and lectures prior to the late 1940s which have been recently published as volumes one, two, and three of *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*. The archives of many of the institutions at which Thurman taught or attended—Howard University, Columbia University, Rochester Seminary (now Colgate Rochester Seminary), and Haverford College—have provided important documents from this period of Thurman's life that are included in these collected papers.

At key moments in this dissertation, the fourth wall between scholar and reader collapses. When I find it necessary, I describe archival resources and the absence of archival sources. I have found that the absence of a document can also make a statement and attention is required to both to what a document says and does not say. Some of the associations with which Thurman was affiliated were unable to retain documents. Consequently, at times I found only pieces of a skeleton, as it were, rather than a full body, and I mentioned this for the sake of truth.

Following my research efforts, I have found that Thurman's writings are best read as an amalgamation of the social gospel he absorbed at Rochester Seminary and a pragmatic mysticism he learned at Haverford College. In Thurman's hands, the social gospel and pragmatic mysticism became something different as he addressed racial realities. Strangely, discussion of racial matters are absent from his seminary papers. However, during Thurman's work as a student activist, one can see him utilizing the social gospel to buttress his political interest.

Howard Thurman appeared to live two separate intellectual lives during his time as a student: one as an erudite scholar divorced from politics and the other as an activist seeking racial harmony. Only after leaving his career as a student was Thurman able to join the two worlds of high-minded scholarship and justice-seeking activism.

The idea of blacks as intellectuals with a distinct intellectual history is relatively new. Works by and about black intellectuals are seldom read; and when they are read, they are often met with marked imprecision. This is the case because American intellectual historians have given little attention to the strivings of black intellectuals. Apart from David Levering Lewis' two-volume portrait of Du Bois and John Ansbor's *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind*, few works take seriously the intellectual genealogy, development, and influence of black intellectuals.[22] Coming out of this de-historicized context, many black intellectuals appear on the scene without attention to the intellectual influences and social imperatives they engaged. Many accounts of American thought, such as American liberal theology and pragmatism, either make small mention of African Americans or completely omit them. This dissertation locates Thurman and his black contemporaries in their heretofore uncharted intellectual context by lifting up their voices and identifying the various tools they used in their scholarship. With respect to Thurman's intellectual genealogy and intellectual landscape, this dissertation investigates the various institutions where Thurman was educated, the identity of these institutions, their faculty, and their significance within the broader scheme of the intellectual history of their respective periods.

[22]David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1993) and *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (Holt & Company, 2000); John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982)*.

Tracing the roots and development of Thurman's theology and philosophy, I portray the evolution of his thought into a unique amalgamation of the social gospel and American pragmatism. I call attention to his studies at Rochester Seminary from 1923 to 1926, where he encountered the legacy of social gospel patriarch Walter Rauschenbusch. This dissertation provides a close reading of Thurman's Rochester professors' works along with his various seminary papers for such professors, hence distilling his social gospel connection. Later in the dissertation, I discuss how Thurman's social gospel hermeneutic became manifested in his work as a scholar and minister. Ultimately, one finds that for Thurman the social gospel was more than merely a tool for correcting economic inequality; rather, his understanding of the social gospel led him to include race and gender inequalities as appropriate areas of theological analysis and religious activism.

Thurman's connection to pragmatism began the summer before his senior year at Morehouse when he went to Columbia University and studied under philosopher E. A. Burt. At Columbia, Thurman read John Dewey's *How We Think* and *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking*, an edited volume compiled by Columbia University's department of philosophy. From Thurman's seminary papers, one learns that Thurman continued his study of pragmatism, quoting not only John Dewey but also the works of William James. This connection to William James, one can comfortably assume, was further bolstered by Thurman's study under Rufus Jones, the noted Haverford College Quaker. As Matthew Hedstrom put forth in *The Rise of Liberal Religion*, Rufus Jones's *Social Law in the Spiritual World* was "both a skillful reinterpretation of James by a practicing mystic and a bridge between James and the popular inspirational writers of the twentieth century."[23] While Thurman's papers from Haverford have

[23] Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion*, 3.

not been found, one can surmise that Thurman accepted Jones's pragmatic mysticism because Thurman went on to teach similar classes to Jones's, including a course on religion and psychology.[24] In Jones's religion and psychology course, Jones used William James's dense two-volume *Psychology*. This dissertation attempts to draw the line between James's *Psychology* and the approaches to religion taken by Jones and Thurman.

Further, in Thurman's pragmatic mysticism, I mine an undiscovered vein in American pragmatism. Louis Menand, author of *The Metaphysical Club*, gestured toward classical pragmatism's African American offspring when he mentioned Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois in relation to James.[25] Locke and Du Bois, however, stood as more tertiary figures for Menand in comparison to the central robust portraits he draws of white pragmatists. Cornel West's magisterial text *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of American Pragmatism* gave significantly more attention to the rich legacy of pragmatism with weighty portraits of such white theologians and cultural philosophers as Reinhold Niebuhr, Sidney Hook, and Lionel Trilling, along with the usual presentation of James and Dewey.[26] While West graphed in detail pragmatism's sweep from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Richard Rorty, he missed the contribution of Haverford's pragmatic torchbearers such as the mystically inclined Rufus Jones and Howard Thurman. Rather than placing Jones and Thurman in the center of the narrative along with the pragmatic deist Reinhold Niebuhr, West left them to religious scholars who held more theological proclivities. The weight of the history of Jones and Thurman has fallen on the shoulders of religious historians Gary Dorrien, Leigh Schmidt, Quinton Dixie, and

[24] In these courses, Thurman likely utilized James's two-volume *Psychology*, which Jones also had used.
[25] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2001) 394.
[26] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of American Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

Peter Eisenstadt who appear to not hold significant interest in pragmatism in general nor African American pragmatist in particular. This dissertation adds a limb to pragmatism's family tree by bringing to light Thurman's education and later writings as a minister and scholar.

The pragmatic streak in Thurman's work is also important because unlike other pragmatic deists—or perceived pragmatic deists like James, Jones, or Reinhold Niebuhr—Thurman was born under and victimized by American racism. This aspect shines through in Thurman's work in his ministering to the night-side of religion and democracy. Indeed, Thurman's life and thought, to use the language of James, signifies someone who did not begin "life with a bottle or two of champagne inscribed to their credit. . . ."[27] Rather, Thurman's mystical pragmatism sings the blues of American democracy and the evasion of tragic matters within American Christianity.

Thurman's color-concerned pragmatism and social gospel hermeneutic sets him apart from his intellectual contemporaries, especially because of his politics in the 1930s and '40s. Reinhold Niebuhr and other Union Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School liberals had reached a high point of intellectual and political influence by the late-1940s. Simultaneously, Howard University—the place of Thurman's deanship—was a hive for black intellectuals, numbering among them most of the notable black figures in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Consequently, I provide a picture of the black and white intellectuals of this time, and display how Thurman's color-concerned politics distinguished him from both circles.

One of the major topics of 1930s and 1940s black intellectualism is the proto-post-racial politics put forth by Howard University professors Abram Harris, Ralph Bunche, and the early E.

[27] William James, *Varieties of the Religious Experience* (New York: A Public Book, 2003, Kindle Edition), 56.

Franklin Frazier—as a group better known as the "young turks." Two scholars have more recently engaged this era of Howard's history: Nikhil Singh in *Black Is a Country* and Jonathan Scott Holloway in *Confronting the Veil*.[28] Holloway and Singh held that Harris, Bunche, and Frazier argued that economic class, not racism, was the major problem oppressing blacks in America. Although Holloway and Singh discussed the various ways other black intellectuals and activists reacted to this political ideology, they neglected the voices of core members of the Howard University's humanities faculty, among them Alain Locke, Benjamin Mays, and Howard Thurman. This dissertation examines the works of Thurman and his Howard University humanities colleagues during the 1930s and 1940s, and defines their race-sensitive politics over and against the politics of the "young turks."

Thurman's color-concerned politics also matters when one looks at the politics of the white liberal theologians at Union Theological Seminary in New York and Yale Divinity School liberals in these same decades. Thurman certainly belonged in the American liberal theological tradition; however, his racial politics pushed the envelope of many Union and Yale school liberals. These theologians rarely engaged racism as a theological problem for America or its churches. No theologian of this era is more of an enigma when it comes to racial politics than the major American theologian of the 20th century Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr, who included Du Bois's tragic *The Souls of Black Folk* and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* on his Union syllabi, never gave a major treatment of race in the entire corpus of his work.[29] Outside of slight mentions in his classic *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr

[28] Nikhil Singh*, Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919–1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
[29]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 10: Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 314.

was a racial gradualist holding to an idealistic notion that racial inequalities would eventually work themselves out.[30] This dissertation shows Thurman being influenced by Niebuhr's theology, but also breaking with Niebuhr and the majority of the liberal theologians of his time.

The Approach to the Undiscovered Thurman and Chapter Outlines

Each chapter of the dissertation highlights the historical, political, and intellectual milieu in which Howard Thurman lived. I follow the historical methods used by biographers David Garrow in *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* and David Levering Lewis's W. E. B. Du Bois biographies.[31] While Garrow and Lewis craft biographies about a historical figure, they go beyond the immediate person of their respective books to illuminate the broader historical movements of their time.

In the first chapter, I discuss Thurman's rearing in Daytona, Florida, to place him as a product of the American Jim Crow South. Here, I delineate the realities of Thurman's Jim Crow rearing and the various people who left imprints on his early life, including his grandmother and Mordecai Johnson. Thurman's childhood church life receives attention as Jim Crow effects extended into African American religious life. Moreover, as a black youth in Florida at the turn of the 20th century, Thurman was the product of an environment where Jim Crow left most blacks underemployed and undereducated. As if Jim Crow were not enough, in these years Thurman struggled with his vocation under the pressures of poverty and World War I.

[30]Renowned black theologian James Cone makes a similar argument about Niebuhr and other white liberal theologians of his ilk in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree.* James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 50-89.

[31] David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial Publishing, 1987).

The second chapter shows how Thurman's undergraduate years at Morehouse College marked his entrance into academia—the black intelligentsia, in particular—as well as pacifist activism. I begin by presenting Morehouse from the 1910s and the 1920s as an institution and its impact on Atlanta, which was a hotbed of racism and a center for black middle class life. This chapter also examines the men who mentored Thurman at Morehouse: President John Hope, E. Franklin Frazier, Benjamin Mays, and Milton Lorimer. Close attention to the Morehouse years places Thurman's attraction to pacifism and the beginnings of his relationship with FOR in context with the influence of post-World War I politics. The chapter closes with the highlighting of Thurman's attending summer courses at Columbia University where he became further immersed in the American intellectual left.

The third chapter argues that Rochester Seminary introduced Thurman to the social gospel and that Thurman's student-activism as a seminarian is indicative of his acceptance of this theology. Thurman, however, expanded his theological development beyond the social gospel, extending it in the direction of liberal theology more broadly considered. George Cross, who taught a modernist approach to theology, exerted a particularly deep influence on Thurman. The Rochester years mark a time when Thurman lived something of a bifurcated life. In the classroom, he expressed a color-blind, high-minded theology. Meanwhile, his public pronouncements—from pulpits, lectures, and articles in student activist magazines—boldly confronted American's devastating racial realities. Accordingly, the chapter discusses Thurman's endeavors to match his theology with his analysis of politics, science, philosophy, and culture.

The fourth chapter situates Thurman within American pragmatism, as he deepened his connection to the tradition by studying under Rufus Jones, the Quaker mystic, at Haverford College. I probe Jones's papers and books in order to piece together the ideas Howard Thurman

likely encountered. The combination of Jones's mysticism and pragmatism had a lasting influence on Thurman, though Thurman later molded these philosophical elements to address the conditions of oppressed people. This chapter also explores Thurman's pastorship of his first church in Oberlin, Ohio, while he furthered his biblical studies, which took place prior to his time at Haverford.

Chapter five focuses on how Thurman created a unique form of religious liberalism as Dean of Chapel and professor of religion at Howard University, which at once engaging racial oppression and articulating a complex spirituality. I start by looking at Thurman's beginnings as a scholar and academic minister at Spelman College and then his move to Howard University. I consider the marked influence Spelman students had on Thurman's biblical hermeneutic, inspiring the pilot pieces that later became his well-known book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Moreover, I detail Thurman's role as a college minister, where he pushed his audience beyond narrow spiritual conceptions and toward eclectic religious experiences. Here, Thurman expressed a black religious liberalism through the use of black iconography, engagement with non-Christian religious texts, and interactions with liberal religious speakers, all the while voicing his own ruminations about the life of the soul.

Chapter six examines Thurman's further involvement in liberal religion. His trip to India and his meeting with activist Mahatma Gandhi loom large, as it informed his later work on pacifism with the FOR and his pluralistic ministry at the Fellowship Church for All People in San Francisco. Thurman returned to America expecting to become an African American Gandhi. However, as the chapter shows, he became less politically engaged as an activist, mostly dedicating his pastoral work to nursing the wounds of America's racially divided church.

Each of these chapters offers a portrait of Howard Thurman struggling to find his voice amid the dissonance of America life—its racism and divisive dogmas. Readers will find that Thurman emerged with a robust pluralistic religiosity and racial politics.[32] Ultimately, Thurman's work toward racial and religious integration was part of a larger legacy of black Spiritual Leftists, who found their liberal religious life and politics outside of black churches. Thurman's wide vision of religion offers readers a lens for understanding current black millennial activists who have emerged outside of black churches in response to police violence. In the end, Thurman and other black Spiritual Leftists push us toward a faith that wrestled with the particular complexities of black life, while expanding to include all humanity.

[32] I define "pluralism" as the religious engagement with multiple faiths while respecting each faith as having equal footing with one another. I use the term "religiosity" to define religious activity as well as the beliefs of the various subjects of this dissertation.

Chapter 1: Howard Thurman and the Jim Crow South

No experience shaped Howard Thurman more than his Jim Crow southern rearing. Thurman's theology, philosophy, and ministry always bore the imprint of his social location as a poor black child in Daytona, Florida. At the age of 65, Thurman reflected on the lasting effects of his experience:

> The fact that the first twenty-three years of my life were spent in Florida and in Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit and has rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black. . . . a strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide and would achieve in literal fact what is experienced as literal truth: human life is one and all men are members one of another.[1]

From a childhood beset with "white only" signs, segregated spaces, and lynchings, miseries of the South haunt Thurman's many sermons, essays, and books. His Southern wounding did not lead him to call for hatred of the white race; rather, the blue notes of his experience in the American South sounded the baseline of his work for human solidarity.

Thurman's mysticism emerged in reaction to the volatile racial environment of his childhood. As this chapter shows, Thurman and his family had a strained relationship with the local Baptist church, Mt. Bethel. As a result of this frayed relationship, Mt. Bethel did not provide him with a spiritual respite from the hostile racial climate. Instead, Thurman sought a spiritual life outside the church which had caused him so much pain. As a result, Thurman relied upon the "slave religion" of his grandmother and the spiritual quickening of silent prayer and contemplation in nature.

[1]Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1965), x.

The forging of Thurman's spirituality in the context of Southern racism later made the thoughts of liberal religion something different in his hands. Similar to other black liberal ministers before him, such as Earl Monroe, Francis Grimke, and Mordecai Johnson, Thurman molded the liberal religious tradition to his context and conditions. His rearing in Florida, with its blatant racism, was the social imperative to which he attempted to make liberal religion answer.

Nadir America, the South, and Daytona Beach, Florida

Thurman came of age during the nadir of race relations in America, a low point that meant more than black disenfranchisement from democratic life, voting, jobs, equal pay, or other opportunities. It was a time formed by the not so distant past of chattel slavery and the failed Reconstruction Era. Blacks dealt with the absurdity of defining themselves in an environment where most of the white ruling majority looked upon them still as "slaves" and laws and customs of America, especially in the American south, reflected and reinforced this view.

The pervading view of black lives as inferior or even disposable left blacks exposed to the threat of random violence. Specifically, this American nadir was marked by the increase in black lynchings. 1899, the year of Thurman's birth, was the last year of a decade with the most lynchings of blacks in American history.[2] Lynchings were more than just violent acts; they were the ultimate symbol of white control over black people. Lynchings reminded black Americans, "This is what happens to Negroes who act out of place." Unfortunately, "acting out of place" ironically meant blacks working for their own social and economic uplift.

[2] Susan B. Carter, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present, Volume 5* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2006), 5.

Much of black music and literature at the time responded to the heartbreaks of American racism. The two most popular genres of music in this period, Ragtime and the Blues, expressed the feelings of tragedy black people experienced. Both Ragtime and the Blues belong to broader black musical tradition that gives, as Ralph Ellison put it, "an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically."[3] Ragtime compositions such as Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" (1899) and Blues songs such as Heart Wand's "Dallas Blues" (1912) brought to the fore "the blue note," a chord that is played off the down beat and defined by syncopation. These notes often modify a melody, re-creating the music in modest yet transformative ways. As scholar Eddie Glaude explained, the "blue note [is] an unstable chord that [calls] attention to the unbridled chaos at the heart of American democracy."[4]

Many black writers of the early 20th century mimicked the artists of the Blues tradition. Analogous to Blues artists, early 20th century black writers did not resist

> [the] impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic . . . lyricism.[5]

In newspapers, books, and other forms of literature, blacks expressed the anguish of their situation. The truths that these writers distilled rendered a painful picture of the black experience.

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois described the despair found in blacks' lives in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In essays such as "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "Of the Dawn of Freedom," Du Bois gave a detailed historical and political account of the tragedies and endeavors of black

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[3] Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *The Antioch Review, Volume 5. Number 2. Summer 1945* (Antioch: Antioch Review, 1945), 199.
[4] Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 48.
[5] Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," 199.

people in America. After reflecting on the realities of black life in America, Du Bois found very little hope. In "Of the Passing of the First Born," Du Bois ruminated on the death of his infant son who would have been only three years Thurman's junior. Du Bois pondered whether or not his son's death was an early escape from the despair of black life.

> That night [of his death] there sat an awful gladness in my heart . . . my soul whispers ever to me saying, "Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bound, but free." No bitter meanness now shall sicken his baby heart till it die a living death, no taunt shall madden his happy boyhood. Fool that I was to think or wish that his little soul should grow choked and deformed within the Veil![6]

His words reveal the macabre landscape of black life in the early 20th century. For Du Bois, his son's death meant that his son would never have to live with the myth of white supremacy, the lie of perennial black non-personhood, or the "double consciousness" of which Du Bois was so painfully aware. Du Bois, perhaps like some other black parents of this era, found solace in his son's dying because the child did not have to succumb to the social deaths caused by American racism.

In 1912, James Weldon Johnson's *An Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* articulated a similar outlook regarding the state of blacks in America. Through his protagonist, the Ex-Colored Man, Johnson paints a large portrait of race in America and Europe. After witnessing a lynching in Georgia, the ethnically ambiguous Ex-Colored Man decided to leave the race. The musings of Johnson's protagonist merit lengthy quotation:

> All the while, I understood that it was not discouragement, or fear, or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. For certainly

[6] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Dover Books, Kindle Edition, 2010), 100.

> the law would restrain and punish the malicious burning alive of animals.[7]

The Ex-Colored man's words reveal the vulnerability of black people. Johnson's protagonist brings to the fore the reality of lynching trees, white race riots, and other random terrorist acts visited upon black bodies in the early 20th century.

Howard Thurman grew up acutely aware of the devaluing of black life described by black writers and musicians of this era. Over 50 years later, he remembered such a moment in his childhood at the hands of a young white girl whose family employed him to do yard work, in this instance raking leaves. "She enjoyed following me around in the yard as I worked," he recalled.

> One day, after I had made several piles for burning, she decided to play a game. Whenever she found a beautifully colored leaf, she would scatter the pile it was in to show it to me. Each time she did this, I would have to rake the leaves into a pile again. This grew tiresome, and it doubled my work. Finally, I said to her in some desperation, "Don't do that anymore because I don't have time." She became very angry and continued to scatter the leaves. "I'm going to tell your father about this when he comes home," I said. With that, she lost her temper completely and, taking a straight pin out of her pinafore, jabbed me in the hand. I drew back in pain. "Have you lost your mind?" I asked. And she answered, "Oh, Howard, that didn't hurt you! You can't feel!"[8]

As Anthony Pinn explains in *Terror and Triumph*, "This young child had already learned a social assumption: humans have feelings with which we must concern ourselves. You, Howard Thurman, are a Negro. You are not human as whites are human. Hence, you have no feelings."[9]

Thurman's youthful grasp of the consequences of race and racism in America was further heightened by his growing up in the Jim Crow South. The Jim Crow South fashioned a peculiar

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[7] Sondra Kathyrn Wilson, ed., *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson, Volume II: Social, Political, and Literary Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 353.
[8] Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 7.
[9] Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 23.

division between blacks and whites. Blacks were forced to lead their lives in separate places from whites, such as restaurants, restrooms, churches, neighborhoods, and other so-called public spaces. However, blacks also lived integrated lives, when it came to the places where they labored. Many, if not most, blacks labored for whites as domestics, sharecroppers, farm hands, or did other forms of manual labor. This power dynamic where blacks were seen only as servants reaffirmed the master-slave relationship of chattel slavery. Black life, in the eyes of many whites in the South, was often defined as subservience based on an assumed ontological—or even theological—inferiority.

Thurman's home state of Florida is an excellent example of large scale black exploitation at the turn of the 20th century. Historian Paul Ortiz paints a detailed picture of black labor in Florida. He tells of the harsh and unjust labor conditions for black workers in both urban and rural Florida where they were "treated very cruel[ly], working for very low wages, [in some cases] seventy-five cents a day. . . ."[10] Often, black "recalcitrant field hands were 'dressed down' or whipped."[11] Urban black laborers in Florida faced no better, toiling entire weeks for extremely low wages or even to be refused payment by white employers. The words of domestic worker Gertrude Williams were indicative of the conditions faced by many black workers throughout Florida:

> I worked out too in the public. And I worked at they houses and worked and took care of their children and washed and ironed their clothes. Yes! It was a lot time they *did not* pay. You'd work a whole week and they wouldn't *pay at all but $3.00 a week for all day long!*[12]

[10] Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005), 129.
[11] Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed*, 129.
[12] Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed*, 128.

Due to these unjust labor practices and similar experiences of the 1910s, many blacks tried to leave Florida for more lucrative possibilities in Northern cities.

Although Northern companies recruited blacks to work, Florida's officials in various cities worked to keep blacks in Florida. The 1910s are filled with episodes of Florida police departments barring entire black communities from northern-bound transportation. Ortiz tells of "hundreds of African Americans from Gadsden and Leon Counties gathered together at a major rail depot in Tallahassee to say farewell to the Sunshine State."[13] Unfortunately, the tobacco growers and state officials "had no intention of surrendering to black [workers]." The farmers took the extreme efforts of asking their Northern counterparts to stop labor recruitment and having the local police shut down railway depots to prevent teens from heading north.[14]While many blacks chose to leave the cruel conditions of Florida, many others chose to stay—Howard Thurman's family among them.

Thurman's hometown, Daytona Beach, had a reputation for a tamer racial climate than most of Florida because it was known as a winter refuge for white, Northern and European "snow bird" vacationers. Although Thurman probably did not encounter the brutal racism that existed in other towns, Jim Crow Daytona was still a treacherous racial environment for a black person. Statistically, blacks in Daytona did not have a large enough population to seal themselves off into an autonomous community; consequently, they were forced to work and shop in white communities where double racial standards were the norm.

In Volusia County, the county where Daytona Beach is located, whites outnumbered blacks by more than two to one. In 1900, Volusia Country had 10,003 whites to its 3,464

[13] Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed*, 128.
[14] Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed*, 131.

blacks.[15] A decade later, the black population nearly doubled to 6,592 as the white population declined marginally.[16] Volusia fell far behind the more highly black populated Leon County, which in 1910 had 14,726 blacks and a relatively minuscule 4,697 whites, and Jefferson County which had 13,114 blacks and only 4,096 whites.[17]

Without a black majority, living in close quarters to whites left an indelible mark on Thurman. He recalled living in constant fear of white violence and other forms of oppression. He remembered:

> [The] climate of our town, Daytona Beach, Florida, was better than most Southern towns because of the influence of the Northern white tourists who wintered there. Nevertheless, life became more and more suffocating, because of the fear of being brutalized, beaten, or otherwise outraged.[18]

Thurman and his childhood peers were not the only ones privy to black fear of whites; many of the adults had reasonable fears of whites, too. Thurman's mother, Alice Thurman, probably had a lifelong fear of whites. Her fear is pointed out by historian Gary Dorrien, who notes that when she spent time at her son's multiracial Fellowship Church in San Francisco, California, 40 years later, she felt terror "being surrounded by 'Buckra,' as she called white people." "'The first chance they get,' she said to her son, 'you don't know what they will do to you. I'm scared to go to sleep at night, and you just have to take me out of this place.'"[19] Ironically and tragically, Alice Thurman lived more comfortably as a black person in the Jim Crow South than when she

[15] Historical Census Browser: http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php., n.p.
[16] Historical Census Browser: http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php., n.p.
[17] Historical Census Browser: http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php., n.p.
[18] Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Press, 1959), 17.
[19] Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1981), 156; Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Theological Liberalism, Volume II* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 564.

was among white liberals of California. Sadly, she found a strange solace in the familiarity of her marginalized, clearly defined status.

Thurman's Childhood and Religion

Little personal information can found about either of Howard Thurman's parents, Saul and Alice Thurman. Born in 1850, Saul was 22-years Alice's senior. A child in the deep rural South prior to emancipation, Saul was probably born a slave. As an adult and after emancipation, he worked as a railroad laborer and Alice was a domestic worker.[20] Due to Saul's death in 1907, Howard Thurman only had seven or eight years with his father. Nevertheless, Thurman's memories of him offered some of the most deeply influential moments of his life.

Though Saul was not well-educated, Thurman remembered that he had "an original mind about religion."[21] Saul's religious sensibilities ran in a more liberal direction contrary to Thurman's mother who was a far more traditional Protestant. In various works, Thurman recounted Saul staying at home on Sundays as the rest of the family went off to church. When the family returned from church, Howard often found his father reading the works of the agnostic Robert Ingersoll, one of the American church's greatest critics. Ingersoll wrote in essays such as "Thomas Paine" that "progress is born of doubt and inquiry. The Church never doubts, never inquires. To doubt is heresy, to inquire is to admit that you do not know. . . ."[22] Perhaps, Saul's willingness to embrace doubt and inquiry is the reason he felt that "if he [joined] the church, he would [lose] his soul."[23] Saul sought a different kind of salvation, believing that "there was more

[20] Census Browser: http://www.worldvitalrecords.com/PersonViewCensus.aspx?ix=fs_census_1880&qt=i&zdocid=1000110977311.
[21] Landrom Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2" (San Francisco: The Howard Educational Trust, Video, 1978).
[22] Robert Ingersoll, *Lectures of Col. R. G. Ingersoll* (Chicago: Rhodes & McClure Publishing Co., 1898), 454.
[23] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

religion, more honesty, [and] more virtue . . . in people who did not have the pretensions of the church."[24]

In 1907, Thurman felt the repercussions of his father's alleged heresy when Saul lost a bout with double pneumonia. Uncharacteristically, Saul came home on a weekday afternoon, breaking with his usual weekend visit home from work.[25] When Alice opened the front door to let him in, Saul collapsed to the floor. Alice and Howard laid Saul on a bed and for five days attempted to nurse him back to health.[26] On the last day, Saul began taking deep croaky breaths, the so-called "death rattle."[27] In the last hours of Saul's life, Howard sat on one side of the bed and Alice on the other. While holding her husband's hand, Alice said to him, "Saul, are you ready to die?"[28] In between his deep breaths, Saul answered "Alice, all my life I've been a man. I'm not afraid to die."[29] He let out a huge breath and died in the arms of his wife and son.

Regrettably, Daytona Beach's racism even extended to blacks in death. Daytona Beach, Florida, had no black funeral homes. According to Thurman, "The funeral parlor was available only to white people; even the bodies of Negroes could not be embalmed on the premises of the undertaker's establishment."[30] As a result, the Thurmans were solely responsible for preparing Saul's body for burial. Immediately after Saul's death, Howard and Nancy Ambrose, Howard's maternal Grandmother, bathed Saul's body and stretched him across their kitchen table. Later, the family placed Saul in a casket to ready him for burial from their home church, Mt. Bethel Baptist.

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[24] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[25] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[26] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[27] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[28] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[29] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[30] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

Thurman's horrific memory of preparing his father's body was later eclipsed by an even more harrowing experience. The minister at Mt. Bethel refused to allow Saul to be buried from the church because he believed Saul had died outside of Christ. Nancy Ambrose confronted Mt. Bethel's deacon board regarding Saul's burial and convinced them to hold Saul's funeral at the church. In spite of the deacons' decision, Mt. Bethel's minister still refused to lead the funeral service. The Thurman family had to find another minister to conduct the service.

A traveling evangelist, Rev. Samuel Cromarte, volunteered to conduct the funeral. What the Thurman family saw as "a most gracious act" was really a Trojan horse. Recalling the funeral, Thurman noted, "Cromarte seized on the opportunity . . . to take my father's funeral service . . . because it was a chance for him to announce what happens to you when die out of Christ."[31] Thurman later recollected, "During the sermon, to our utter amazement, the minister 'preached my father into hell.' Here was an object lesson to all unbelievers, to all sinners." With his mother's hand patting his bare knee, Thurman whispered throughout the sermon, "He didn't know Poppa? Did he? Did he, Momma?"[32] On the long ride home from the funeral, Thurman resolved, "When I grow up to be a man, one thing is sure, I'll never have anything to do with the church."[33]

This was only the first quarrel in what appears to have been a turbulent relationship Thurman had with Mt. Bethel, because he and his family remained at the church. Thurman's joining the church after his father's death was met with an "examination and screening" by the board of deacons. Thurman told the deacon's board that he "wanted to learn how to be a Christian." The board gave a surprising rebuke to him, stating he "had not had a Christian

[31] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[32] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 6.
[33] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 6.

experience and would not gain membership until [he] had one."[34] His grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, challenged the board by asking them, "How do you know what God is doing in this boy's life? If he cannot join the church so as to learn from other Christians how to be a Christian, where else can he go?"[35] Because of her bold and persuasive words, the deacons allowed Thurman to become a member.

Thurman's relationship with Mt. Bethel Baptist Church was complicated. Thurman joined the church, even though the memory of Mt. Bethel's mistreatment of his father haunted him. He witnessed the replaying of episodes similar to that of his father's treatment between so-called nonbelievers and those in Mt. Bethel's community. Stockings, a local physician who became one of Thurman's mentors, also experienced Mt. Bethel's contempt for nonbelievers. "[Stockings] refused to join the church," Thurman remembered:

> [I]t cost him: there was a feeling in our community that if a doctor did not belong to the church as a devout Christian, he was out of touch with the spirit of God. No one wanted to trust his or her life to such a person, however skilled.[36]

Only after Stockings saved the members of Mt. Bethel from a deranged gun-wielding assailant did congregants put their lives in his care.

The castigation and rejection of non-believers gave Howard Thurman a marked suspicion of Mt. Bethel and the broader church's exclusivity. Even in his early years, Thurman found peculiar pain in the boundaries of church dogma. Thurman did not deny his intuitive objection to such attitudes and practices. "All through my early years," he said, "I was in subtle and inarticulate conflict with what seemed to me to be germane to the religious experience of the

[34] Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream* (New York: Harper Brothers Publisher, 1959), 17.
[35] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 17.
[36] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 21.

Christian and what was only a part of the Christian culture, or Christian etiquette, of our community."[37] Thurman took particular issue with "the fact that the doctrine of [Christian] salvation made a gulf between those who belonged to the church as members and those who did not."[38] For Thurman, Mt. Bethel's Christian doctrine of salvation placed nonbelievers not only outside the love of God, but also the parishioners' compassion as well.

Nevertheless, at Mt. Bethel, Thurman found mentorship and guidance. Thurman was given a "spiritual covering" by the members of Mt. Bethel.[39] He acknowledged that his church sponsors had a positive influence: "Looking back, it is clear to me that the watchful attention of my sponsors in the church served to enhance my consciousness that whatever I did with my life mattered."[40] Among their teachings, they warned the young Thurman that "Satan is always waiting to tempt you to make you turn your back on your Lord."[41] The relationships produced by the church may have helped Thurman begin to make peace with the idea of ministry as his profession. Throughout Thurman's teen years, he often filled the pulpit of Mt. Bethel as its Sunday morning preacher. Nevertheless, Mt. Bethel's members and ministers played a small role in shaping Thurman's religious foundations.

Nancy Ambrose was a much greater influence on Thurman's outlook on the world. Ambrose was what Thurman described as an "anchor person in [his] family."[42] Ambrose cared for Thurman and his sisters, Henrietta, two years Thurman's senior, and Madaline Mae, nine

[37] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 17.
[38] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 17.
[39] "Spiritual covering" is a term of black church vernacular, which refers to the close shepherding of typically young or new Christians by ministers, church elders, and/or lay leaders.
[40] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 20.
[41] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 21.
[42] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

years his junior, while Alice Thurman worked for a local white family.[43] Ambrose imparted to her grandchildren the wisdom she gained from many years of arduous toil, having been born into slavery in 1850 in Madison County, South Carolina, on the plantation of John C. McGhee.[44] During the summers of Thurman's youth, he accompanied Ambrose on her annual "pilgrimage" to visit her eldest daughter Mary in Madison County. On these trips, and throughout her life, Ambrose rarely discussed her life as a slave. "She never spoke of it;" Thurman wrote, "she did not point out landmarks. . . . She granted to no one the rights of passage across her own remembered footsteps."[45]

There was one striking story from slavery, however, that Ambrose frequently shared with her grandchildren. Whenever she sensed her grandchildren were succumbing to the pressures of black life in America, she recounted a story about a slave preacher. Thurman recalled:

> [W]hen [my grandmother] was a young woman on this plantation, once a year or maybe more frequent, I don't remember that detail, a slave minister . . . from a neighboring plantation . . . was permitted to have a religious service for the slaves. And always, it didn't matter what his subject was, he ended his sermon in the same way. She said he would stand and look at them and he would say, "You are not slaves, you are not niggers, you are God's Children!!!" [As she told the story,] a faraway look would come into her eyes. And a slight stiffening of her spine . . . [T]here was a contagion that come to us as little children . . . that the creator of existence also created me. And therefore, with that sort of backing, I could absorb all the violences [*sic*] of life.[46]

Through this story and other forms of advice, Nancy Ambrose helped Howard Thurman and his siblings survive a world controlled by white Southern racists.

[43] Thurman's sister Henrietta died at age 17.
[44] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1 xxxii.
[45] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 21.
[46] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

The wisdom of his grandmother also shaped much of Thurman's religious and ethical convictions. For example, under the tutelage of his grandmother, Thurman inherited his rejection of the Pauline letters of the Bible. Thurman remembered his grandmother forbidding him to read to her the Pauline letters. The reason behind her request was her memory of slave masters using those texts to justify slavery. The slave masters especially often pointed to Ephesians 6:5, "Slaves, obey your human masters with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ" as divine justification of slavery.[47]

Ambrose also gave Thurman an introduction to a pacifism of sorts. On the way home from school, a classmate began bullying Thurman. At first, Thurman ignored his assailant; but later, he chose to fight back. A vivid memory, 60 years later, Thurman recounted the incident in detail:

> I stood all I could and then the fight was on. It was a hard and bitter fight. The fact that he was larger and older than I, and had brothers, did not matter. For four blocks we fought and there was no one to separate us. At last I began to gain in power. With one tremendous effort, I got him to the ground and he conceded defeat. Then I had to come home to face my grandmother. "No one ever wins a fight" were her only words as she looked at me. "But I beat him," I said. [She replied,] "Yes, but look at yourself."[48]

Ambrose's words might have been the initial inspiration for Thurman's pacifist politics. As an adult, Thurman found violence, particularly war, to be "not only futile but . . . thoroughly and completely evil and diabolical."[49]

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[47] Harold Attridge, ed., *HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised with Concordance* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2006), Ephesians 6:5.
[48] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 12.
[49] Walter E. Fluker, ed., *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume 2: Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?, April 1936–August 1943* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 265.

His experiences in nature grounded his religiosity as they deeply inspired him. As a youngster Thurman was a peculiar young man, often feeling like an outsider among his peers. He was short, fat, and pigeon-toed to the point that when he ran his left big toe hit his right heel.[50] This placed Thurman on the outside of all forms of athletics and much of the social life in his school and community. In his autobiography Thurman wrote:

> I seemed to be passed over unnoticed; my company was not welcomed by girls nor by the boys in choosing sides for games. Among my peers I seemed to be an extra, but never quite so. . . . I was ever haunted by a feeling of awkwardness in all my relationships, I felt clumsy. . . . I had no older brother or father to defend me, only Momma, Grandma, and my sisters. Yet somehow I did not feel I was a failure just because I did not "belong" with boys and girls my age. The humiliations of my youth threatened me, but did not undermine my self-worth.[51]

Rather than suffer the ridicule of his peers, Thurman found spiritual refuge in nature. On long walks through the woods and on the beach or when sitting under his "special oak tree," Thurman made a place for prayer and contemplation.

These prayers and meditations in the solace of nature were also Thurman's defense against the harsh environment of Southern racism. Years later, Thurman told of his religious experience with nature and how it helped him resist the bitterness of Southern racism:

> I was a very sensitive child who suffered much from the violences of racial conflict. . . . [L]ife became more and more suffocating because of the fear of being brutalized, beaten, or otherwise outraged. In my effort to keep this fear from corroding my life and making me seek relief in shiftlessness, I sought help from God. I found that the more I turned to prayer, to what I discovered in later years to be meditation, the more time I spent alone in the woods or on the beach, the freer became my own spirit. . . .[52]

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[50] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 252.
[51] Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: University Press of America, 1989), 6.
[52] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 17.

This spiritual stance against the cruel realities of racism was one that Thurman held until the end of his days.

Early Education

One of the chief manifestations of racism in Florida was its lack of schools for black children. Only three high schools for black children existed in the state of Florida.[53] During Thurman's adolescence in Daytona, no school in the area extended beyond the eighth grade.[54] The city of Daytona stopped schooling for blacks at the seventh grade as a way of bolstering their argument that they did not need a black high school because no black children qualified. Luckily, Thurman's middle school principal, a black man named R. H. Howard, saw potential in Thurman and personally taught him Florida's eighth grade curriculum.[55]

This lack of educational advancement lay behind Mary McLeod Bethune's efforts to found the all-girls Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School, which later became Bethune-Cookman College. Bethune's school was the only high school option for blacks in the Daytona Beach area, but it obviously excluded Thurman. When Thurman finished the eighth grade, he had to travel to Jacksonville to study at the Florida Baptist Academy, later re-named the Florida Normal and Industrial Institute.

Part of Thurman's motivation for gaining further education arose from his grandmother's insistence. Nancy Ambrose took an active role in her grandchildren's education. She had her grandchildren's teacher come to their home every Friday to report on their progress.[56] If the reports were unsatisfactory, Ambrose picked a switch from a nearby peach or oak tree and

[53] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[54] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 24.
[55] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 24.
[56] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

whipped the offending grandchild.[57] Her fierce yearning for her grandchildren to become educated came from being denied access to education during her childhood. Thurman highlighted the value his grandmother found in education:

> She [my grandmother] was the sort of companion of . . . the daughter of the [slave] master. . . . And whenever this little girl was caught by her mother, trying to teach my grandmother, who was a girl like herself, her alphabets, the mother would whip the little girl and send her to bed without her meal. And my grandmother felt that there must be some magic in writing and reading. She said to us many times that she felt . . . if freedom ever came, or if she ever grew up, one of the things that she would do would be to learn to read and find out what the secret was. . . .[58]

Sadly, Nancy Ambrose never learned to read, but she was determined to make sure her grandchildren had access to "the secret" that she believed her former master's daughter had.

This story may have fueled Thurman's educational fire, especially as a teenager when the weight of his dreams rested solely on his shoulders, and he moved to Jacksonville having to rely on his own resources because his family could not to give him any financial support. Upon telling his mother about his high school hopes, she replied, "Son you may go but I cannot do anything for you financially, for I must care for your sisters."[59] In response, Thurman told his mother that he only required her prayers.

When Thurman departed for Jacksonville, two events left a deep impression on him. On his way to the railway station, Thurman's grandmother pulled him aside and imparted her last words of advice. After reminding Thurman that she and his mother were unable to give him any money, she spoke these words of wisdom, "Look up always, not down. Look forward always,

[57] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[58] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[59] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 2.

not back. And remember, everything you get, you've got to work for."[60] Her words inspired Thurman to work for his education in spite of his financial difficulties.

Immediately after hearing the encouraging words of his grandmother, Thurman met hardship at the train station. Thurman tells the story most eloquently in his autobiography:

> When the time came to leave for Jacksonville, I packed a borrowed trunk with no lock and no handles, roped it securely, said my good-byes, and left for the railway station. When I bought the ticket, the ticket agent refused to check my trunk on my ticket because the regulations stipulated that the check must be attached to the trunk handle, not to a rope. The trunk would have to be sent express but I had no money except for a dollar and a few cents left after I bought my ticket.
>
> I sat down on the steps of the railway station and cried my heart out. Presently I opened my eyes and saw before me a large pair of work boots. My eyes crawled upward and saw a man's face. He was a black man dressed in overalls and a denim cap. As he looked down at me he rolled a cigarette and lit it. Then he said "Boy, what in the hell are you crying about?"
>
> And I told him.
>
> "If you trying to get out of this damn town to get an education, the least I can do is help you. Come with me," he said. . . .
>
> [He went to the counter] then he took out his raw hide money bag and counted out the money. When the agent handed him the receipt, he handed it to me. Then without a word, he turned and disappeared down the railroad track. I never saw him again."[61]

Thurman never forgot the mysterious man who helped. Thurman later dedicated his autobiography "To the stranger in the railroad station who restored my broken dream sixty-five years ago."[62] As soon as he boarded the train, he promised God that if he got an education and

[60]Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[61]Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 24.
[62]Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 2.

earned a living he would do two things: he would tell his mother never to work again, and annually he would give to help someone in school.[63]

Thurman's years in Jacksonville were challenging. He was always out of money, constantly working, and ill. He lived with a cousin and paid his rent by performing chores around the house. Every day after school, Thurman pressed clothes for people in the neighborhood, charging 25 cents per suit.[64] On Saturdays, Thurman worked an unspecified job from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. for 50 cents.[65] As if hard work and studying were not enough, Thurman only "ate an average of one square meal a day and walked to school, a distance of two and one-half miles."[66] Though laboring under such duress, it is surprising that Thurman was still able to show the teachers at the Florida Baptist Academy his high academic ability. Throughout Thurman's high school career, he held an average of 98 percent, graduating as valedictorian of his class.[67]

Apart from work and school, Thurman's only extracurricular activity was in the local YMCA. As a sophomore, Thurman attended the annual YMCA conference for students of black colleges and normal schools held at Lincoln Academy in Kings Mountain, North Carolina.[68] The keynote speaker was the eminent preacher Mordecai W. Johnson, one of the few prominent, well-educated black ministers of his time. By 1918, the year of their meeting, Johnson had earned his bachelor's degree from Atlanta Baptist College (later re-named Morehouse College), which was validated at University of Chicago, and received his Bachelor of Divinity Degree—

[63] Eventually, Thurman's mother was able to retire after his career blossomed. The second promise that Thurman made was later the impetus behind the Howard Thurman Educational Trust which helped to fund students in poverty.
[64] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 2.
[65] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 2.
[66] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 2.
[67] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 2.
[68] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, xlii.

which later became the Master of Divinity Degree—from Rochester Theological Seminary, where he studied under Walter Rauschenbusch, the father of the social gospel.[69] Four years later, Johnson had earned a Master of Sacred Theology from the Harvard Divinity School.

At the time of the YMCA conference, Johnson was pastor of First Baptist Church in Charleston, West Virginia. Although the script of Johnson's speech does not exist, a letter that Howard Thurman sent to Johnson shows that Thurman was deeply impressed. He asked Johnson for guidance and mentorship as he navigated the arduous route of academia and ministry. In the letter, Thurman shared with Johnson the significance of his need for guidance:

> Please take a personal interest in me and guide me and God will reward you. . . . Believe me when I say you made a deeper impression upon my life than any man at the Conference either last year or this year. I am hoping that you will not misunderstand me. I come to you {for guidance}, I have no real guide but Jesus but in some things I believe that He intended for his "Watchmen" (your expression) to point the way.[70]

Howard Thurman went on to solicit Johnson's advice regarding his religious education in preparation for ministry. Specifically, Thurman feared that his education would be cut short due to the drafting of young men in the Great War.

Thurman's fear of the draft was not the anxiety of someone who dreaded dying in combat. On the contrary, Thurman's apprehension arose from the possibility of war impeding his ability to answer his ministerial calling. Thurman, even in these early years, viewed his ministerial vocation as deeply connected to the needs of his community. One sees Thurman's grasp of the meaning behind his vocation in his letter to Johnson:

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[69]During the early 20th century, many historically black colleges were not accredited institutions of higher learning. Many graduates of historically black colleges did an extra year at an accredited white college after their graduation in order to "validate" their degree.

[70] From Howard Thurman to Mordecai Johnson, 18 June 1918, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 2.

> I want to be a minister of the Gospel. I feel the needs of my people, I see their distressing condition, and have offered myself upon the altar as a living sacrifice, in order that I may help the "skinned and flung down" as you interpret. God wants me [,] and His precious love urges me to take up the cross and follow Him. . . . I am scheduled to finish here next year. As you know, the war is on and young men are being snatched daily. I am patriotic; I am willing to fight for democracy, but my friend Rev. Johnson, my people need me.[71]

A few weeks later, Johnson replied to Thurman stating that he read the story of his "aspirations and . . . strivings with great interest and sympathy."[72] In spite of Thurman's draft fears, Johnson warned Thurman to "Prepare! Prepare! This is the only word I have for you."[73] Johnson insisted Thurman attend college and seminary, following the same route as Johnson.

Under separate cover, Johnson sent Thurman "a brief history of the People of Israel as set forth in the Old Testament."[74] Johnson thought that exposing Thurman to the historical critical method of biblical interpretation would give Thurman "an advantage to cultivate [a] historical perspective" of the Bible.[75] The "historical perspective" that Johnson was probably referring to was the higher criticism of the Bible which emerged out of 19th century Germany scholarship, and it became the norm at liberal American seminaries and divinity schools at the turn of the 20th century.[76] More specifically, higher criticism became popular in liberal American theology schools after the heresy trial of Union Theological Seminary professor Charles Augustus Briggs. Thurman's early exposure to higher criticism significantly shaped the way he understood and viewed Christianity.

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[71]From Howard Thurman to Mordecai Johnson, 18 June 1918, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 2.
[72]From Mordecai Johnson to Howard Thurman, 8 July 1918, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 5.
[73]From Mordecai Johnson to Howard Thurman, 8 July 1918, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 5.
[74]From Mordecai Johnson to Howard Thurman, 8 July 1918, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 5.
[75]From Mordecai Johnson to Howard Thurman, 8 July 1918, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 5.
[76] From Mordecai Johnson to Howard Thurman, 8 July 1918, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 5.

Johnson proved to be a crucial mentor in Thurman's life from his final year of high school into the years of his budding ministerial career. After graduating from Florida Baptist Academy, Thurman followed his mentor's scholastic footsteps to Morehouse College and later Rochester Seminary. Johnson stood out as only the first in a series of academic mentors who molded Thurman's intellectual development. Morehouse College, where Thurman went next, was full of mentors who guided Thurman's educational and political pursuits.

Chapter 2: The Morehouse Years

At Morehouse College, Thurman was mentored by young black scholars poised to lead a generation of black intellectuals. Morehouse professors, such as Benjamin Mays and E. Franklin Frazier, had earned degrees from the leading Northern white universities in America and inspired Thurman to join their ranks in intellectual pursuits as well as the fight for racial justice and equality. In these same years, Thurman first studied philosophy at Columbia University in the summer before his senior year. His Columbia instructors directed him to engage the works of American philosophers, especially the pragmatists. These courses, as well as Thurman's experience in the Columbian and greater New York milieu, exerted a deep influence on his growth as a thinker and minister. Thurman emerged from his undergraduate education with the hunger for a rational religiosity that also fueled his engagement in the struggle for racial justice in the 1930s and 1940s.

Atlanta and Morehouse

Morehouse was founded in 1867 by the American Baptist Missionary Society for the education of black men. Originally established in 1869 as the Augusta Institute in Augusta, Georgia, it moved to Atlanta because of Ku Klux Klan attacks. The school was renamed Atlanta Baptist Seminary. In 1903, the school renamed itself yet again, this time Morehouse College after Henry L. Morehouse, the corresponding secretary of the American Baptist Home Mission Society who procured funding for the college.

By the time Howard Thurman matriculated in 1919, Morehouse was one of five black colleges just west of downtown Atlanta—Spelman College, Morris Brown College, Clarke College, and Atlanta University. Like Morehouse, white missionaries had established these

colleges after the Civil War for the education of African Americans. They chose Atlanta as their location because after the Civil War the Atlanta city council vowed to create equality for its black and white citizens, a surprisingly progressive act even as reconstruction had barely began. The first step Atlanta's political leadership took to ensure equality for its black citizens was the founding of Atlanta University in 1865. Five years later, they agreed to let the Methodist Episcopal Church place Clark College in the city.[1] Among the reasons blacks flocked to Atlanta after the war was the possibility offered by these institutions of higher learning and vocational opportunities. The chance for education and jobs—beyond agricultural and manual labor—caused Atlanta's African American population to more than double between 1860 and 1870, growing from 14,427 to 33,336.[2] This favorable environment for African Americans attracted the governing bodies of Morehouse and Spelman colleges to relocate their campuses from Savannah to Atlanta.

By 1919 when Thurman enrolled at Morehouse, the college had established its reputation as an institution with a strong academic curriculum. In 1906, Morehouse's first black president, John Hope decided to cultivate Morehouse as a liberal arts college rather than as a technical school offering industrial education of the kind advocated by Booker T. Washington. Under Hope's direction, Morehouse was to be no Tuskegee Institute. Morehouse's liberal arts curriculum aimed to form young black men with sharpened critical intellects who were able to advance culturally and socially and lead their race.

In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Morehouse, along with other black colleges in the Atlanta area, played a large role in helping the city's black middle class to flourish. As Martin

[1] "About CAU-History," http://www.cau.edu/about/cau-history.html.
[2] ""Who's right? Cities lay claim to civil rights 'cradle' mantle"/'"Atlanta Journal-Constitution.'" Politifact.com. June 28, 2011.

Luther King, Sr., Thurman's classmate at Morehouse, explained in his autobiography, Atlanta's "black community was not only large but it owned property and [was] sending record numbers of children to college."[3] In this way, the large black population in Atlanta worked to blunt the realities of Jim Crow segregation.

Many blacks in Atlanta felt the significant number of black residents found a community that enjoyed relative autonomy and created a buffer against racial conflict. Black resident Josephine Clement, who grew up in Atlanta during the 1920s, recalled having a "happy childhood" and attributed it ironically to segregation.[4] The reason, she mused, was "because we were so severely segregated. We were really protected from some of the more traumatic experiences that some other people had. They had a large community of black people in Atlanta."[5] Atlanta's large black population notwithstanding, blacks in Atlanta were entirely vulnerable to white violence.

Indeed, all classes of blacks in Atlanta felt the flames of race hatred that forged many white Georgian communities together. Only Mississippi's lynching record exceeded Georgia's in quantity and frequency. Between 1868 and 1930, more than 450 blacks were lynched in Georgia. Many of these lynchings occurred in and around Atlanta, including the infamous Sam Hose lynching of 1899.[6]

While lynchings gave evidence to the rule of white supremacy, racist politicians were also major fixtures in Georgia's halls of government. By the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan reached

[3] Martin Luther King, Sr. with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: Norman Morrow and Company, 1984), 71.
[4] Alton Hornsby, *Black America: A State-By-State Historical Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2011), 197.
[5]Hornsby, *Black America*, 197.
[6]Hornsby, *Black America*, 197.

the height of its political influence in Georgia. Politicians speaking against the Klan risked political suicide. For example, in 1922 Thomas Hardwick, the Georgia governor and Klan oppositionist lost his bid for re-election to Klan sympathizer Clifford Walker.[7]

The climate of racism in Georgia during the early 1920s left Morehouse students often feeling the full weight of Southern white oppression. Thurman recalled that Morehouse students gained their education in a social and political context that inverted the humane values they were learning in their classes:

> We were black men in Atlanta during a period when the state of Georgia was infamous for its racial brutality. Lynchings, burnings, unspeakable cruelties were the fundamentals of existence for black people. Our physical lives were of little value. Any encounter with a white person was inherently dangerous and frequently fatal. Those of us who managed to remain physically whole found our lives defined in less than human terms.[8]

Morehouse administrators and faculty tried to offset the constraints their students faced. John Hope cultivated a culture in which young black men could resist the demeaning crude caricatures of them that racists aimed to convey. Hope raised the spirits and confidence of Morehouse students through such subtle measures as referring to them as "young gentlemen."[9] Thurman reflected years later that "this term of respect meant" much to many of his fellow students' "faltering egos . . . against the backdrop of the South of the 1920s."[10] Thurman went on to say:

> Our Manhood, and that of our fathers, was denied on all levels by white society, a fact insidiously expressed in the way black men were addressed. No matter what his age, whether he was in his burgeoning twenties or full of years, the man was never referred to as "mister," nor even by his surname. No. To the end of his days,

[7] Sally Russell, *A Heart for Any Fate: The Biography of Richard Brevard Russell, Sr.* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004), 198.
[8]Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1981), 36.
[9]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 36.
[10]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 36.

> he had to absorb the indignity of being called "boy," or "nigger," or "uncle." No wonder then that every time Dr. Hope addressed us as "young gentlemen," the seeds of self-worth and confidence, long dormant, began to germinate and sprout.[11]

Thurman later discovered, "[Morehouse] placed over our heads a crown that for the rest of our lives we would be trying to grow tall enough to wear."[12]

Hope and Thurman's professors created an environment that fostered self-love and self-esteem in their students, in effect filling their academic world with what Benjamin Mays called the "Black Church ethic." Within black churches, parishioners created spaces where members—regardless of social or economic status—became equally respected parts of the Body of Christ. Mays, in his autobiography told how blacks embodied the "Black Church ethic":

> [The] opportunity found in the Negro church to be recognized, and to be "somebody," has stimulated pride and preserved the self-respect of many Negroes who would have been entirely beaten by life, possibly completely submerged. . . . A truck driver of average or more than ordinary qualities becomes Chairman of the Deacon Board. . . A woman who would be hardly noticed, socially or otherwise, becomes a leading woman in the missionary society. A girl of little training and less opportunity for training gets the chance to become the leading soprano in the choir of a great church.[13]

Under Hope's leadership and with assistance from such faculty members as Mays, Morehouse students were expected to spread this essential ethic by living it and sharing it with others, especially after graduation.

Another ethical lesson President Hope and the faculty taught Morehouse students was that they had a responsibility to the black community at large to share their education with the

[11]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 36.
[12]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 41.
[13]Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography of Benjamin E. Mays* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1971), 132.

people in their homes and communities. “I was profoundly affected by the sense of mission the college inculcated in us,” Thurman observed:

> We understood that our job was to learn so that we could go back into our communities and teach others. Many of the students were going into the ministry; many were the sons of ministers, which accounted in some measure for the missionary spirit of the place. But over and above this, we were always inspired to keep alive our responsibility to the many, many others who had not been fortunate enough to go to college.[14]

This spirit led Morehouse students, like Thurman, to engage in community service in Atlanta’s black churches, schools, and other community centers.

A notable part of Hope’s program with long-term benefit for students was his requirement that each student had to write, memorize, and perform four original speeches in order to graduate. The students delivered their speeches to an audience of faculty and the entire student body—a harsh jury.[15] If a student could not remember his lines or fumbled through the speech, the student had to return the following week to perform the speech again. This oratory process forced students to learn to improvise and be articulate even in moments when they forgot their lines. This feature of the Morehouse education was so well-known that Thurman observed, “. . . during my post-graduate years, members of the audience would frequently come up to me after one of my talks to say, ‘You’re one of John Hope’s men, aren’t you?’ the Morehouse training was unmistakable.”[16] Such a skill was helpful for the many students, like Thurman, who were preparing to become pastors or public servants.

[14]Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1981), 36.
[15]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 34-35.
[16]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 37.

Thurman's relationship with Hope was particularly peculiar because at the same time that Thurman idolized Hope they often related to each other as equals. In Thurman's autobiography, he expressed his veneration of Hope and how impressive he appeared:

> John Hope was a graduate of Worcester Academy and Brown University. His Phi Beta Kappa key, worn from a chain on his vest, was the first I had ever seen. . . . He was the first black man to become president of Morehouse College. Genteel, scholarly, decorous, he talked to us in chapel every Tuesday morning. This constituted perhaps our greatest single course of instruction in the four undergraduate years. His talks spanned the field of contemporary life. Although a layman, John Hope was an important churchman. He traveled widely and always brought back to us news of the winds that were stirring in the world far beyond our campus.[17]

Hope's manner and standards cultivated within the student body—and in Thurman, particularly—an undeniable appreciation of the president.

The correspondence between Thurman and President Hope during Thurman's undergraduate years indicates that the two indeed regarded each other at times as peers. In 1921, upon hearing about the opening of Morehouse's summer school, Thurman wrote to Hope with an air of familiarity uncommon to the usual hierarchical relationship between student and college president:

> Accept my congratulations for successfully opening the first Summer School of Morehouse College! It is my prayer that it will prove a genuine asset both to the college and the race.[18]

Although Thurman's congratulations may appear odd coming from a student still in the early stages of his college career, Hope responded with gratitude. In Hope's reply, he thanked Thurman for his congratulatory comments and later lamented the firing of Nathan B. Young,

[17]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 35.
[18]From Howard Thurman to John Hope, 20 June 1921, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 17.

Thurman's high school principal. "I have just heard this morning through Mrs. [Mary McLeod] Bethune," wrote Hope:

> [T]hat my dear friend, President N. B. Young, has been removed from his position. I deeply regret this and could not feel it more if it had come to a brother of mine. I hope the people of Florida can bring it to pass that President Young may be called back even if he does not stay but a day.[19]

No mere small talk, this report reveals Hope's willingness to discuss academic politics with Thurman. For Hope to make Thurman, a sophomore, privy to such information indicates an unusual degree of comradery between the two men.

Hope's special interest in Thurman led Thurman to have his first exposure to the politics of white liberals. Invited by Hope, Thurman attended a meeting between Atlanta's black community leaders and white liberals at the local "Colored" YMCA. There Thurman experienced first-hand the cruel reality of white gradualism. In the meeting, a white man proposed to change the segregated seating in the city auditorium. Traditionally, auditoriums relegated blacks to seats in the balcony, commonly referred to as "nigger heaven." The man proposed that the auditorium segregate its seating vertically, with blacks on one side, whites on the other, and a rope in between.[20] Upon hearing what he understood as "racial legerdemain" from these white liberals, Thurman stormed out of the room into the hall as Hope trailed him. In the hallway, Hope told Thurman a bitter truth, "Thurman, I know how you feel about what is going on in there, but you must remember that these are the best and the most liberal men in the entire South. We must work with them. There *is* no one else."[21] Distressed, Thurman nevertheless learned about the limits of Southern white so-called racial "progressivism."

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[19]From John Hope to Howard Thurman, 28 June 1921, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 18.
[20]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 37.
[21] Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 37.

The meeting happened at a critical juncture in the YMCA's history. Before the end of World War I, the YMCA steadfastly segregated activities between the YMCA and the "Colored" YMCA. After the war however, in the 1920s YMCA leadership although white belonged to a younger generation and "began to encourage interracial dialogue and cooperation."[22] Thurman and Hope's meeting with white Southern liberals at the YMCA may well have been related to the YMCA's efforts for improving race relations.

John Hope had a long standing relationship with YMCA, having served as the first black YMCA liaison for black troops in France during the Great War. As an YMCA insider, Hope was well aware of the political commitments held by the whites at the Atlanta meeting, but apparently he intended to teach Thurman a lesson in political pragmatism. Hope did not embrace gradualism or racial kowtowing on the part of blacks, siding with Du Bois during the debate between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington over black accommodationalist politics. Hope directly challenged Washington's 1895 "Atlanta Compromise," voicing his radical political hopes for the race five months later in Nashville, Tennessee:

> Never say, "Let well enough alone." Cease to console yourselves with adages that numb the moral sense. Be discontented. Be dissatisfied. "Sweat and grunt" under present conditions. Be as restless as the tempestuous billows on the boundless sea. Let your discontent break mountain-high against the wall of prejudice, and swamp it to the very foundation. Then we shall not have to plead for justice nor on bended knee crave mercy.[23]

At the YMCA meeting, it appears that Hope restrained his radical tendencies while he parlayed with white liberals who held gradualist, racist views of blacks.

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[22] Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852-1946* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, Kindle Edition, 1994), 1412.

[23] Leroy Davis, *A Clashing of the Soul: John Hope and the Dilemma of African Americans* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 87.

Other Morehouse faculty strongly influenced Thurman, too—among them Benjamin Mays, E. Franklin Frazier, and Lorimer Milton. Although these men held degrees from such elite institutions as Ivy League universities and the University of Chicago, they were unable to gain appointments at white institutions because of explicitly racist prejudiced hiring policies. These scholars contended with vocational callings that required them, as historian Harold Cruse put it, "[to] deal intimately with the white power structure, cultural apparatus and the inner realities of the black in the world at one and the same time."[24] Morehouse's faculty had to navigate the absurd task of teaching, mentoring, and inspiring young black men in a world that regarded their lives as inferior.

In reflection on his Morehouse years, Thurman did not give details about his classes. Instead, he focused on the distinct mentorship moments and personal advice he received from his professors, many of whom were only a few years Thurman's senior and still finishing their graduate degrees. Because these professors were not far removed from college themselves, they were able to offer Thurman advice to which he could relate well. Two such professors, Benjamin E. Mays and E. Franklin Frazier, later served on the faculty at Howard University with Thurman.

Thurman stated that he majored in economics while at Morehouse, but the *Morehouse College Annual Catalogue* of 1919-1920 does not show a pure economics major, though the school offered economics courses. Walter Fluker found that Thurman took several courses in the social sciences, finance, and sociology.[25] Nevertheless, Thurman's overarching interest lay in the humanities, and he increasingly delved into the questions those disciplines explored.

[24] Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: Morrow Books, 1967), 451.
[25]From Howard Thurman to John Hope, 20 June 1921, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 17.

Benjamin Mays was the youngest professor teaching Thurman. Only in his late 20's, he worked at Morehouse between graduate stints at the University of Chicago where he studied religious sociology. Mays played more of an advisory role in relation to Thurman than as a classroom instructor. Thurman identified Mays as one of his main advisers during his last two years of college, naming him specifically as the reason for his attending Columbia University in the summer of 1922. Mays, by contrast, did not recall Thurman as significantly, except for his recounting Thurman's and his classmate Jim Nabrit's debate team win over Fisk University under his guidance as the team's coach.

E. Franklin Frazier, who like Mays was in between stages of graduate study, seems to have held Thurman at arm's length.[26] As a proud and militant atheist, Frazier often ridiculed Thurman's religious beliefs.[27] Furthermore, Frazier acted as a bit of an iconoclast in relation to Morehouse rituals. Frazier expressed his reproach for Morehouse customs by refusing to stand during the Morehouse Alma Mater and take part in religious exercises at the school. Consequently, Frazier made Thurman and his classmates highly uncomfortable because of this blatant assault on the college's traditions.

Frazier also resented the youthful arrogance that Thurman exuded after his studies at Columbia. The prickliness between the two men was mutual. When Thurman took Frazier's "Social Theory" course in his senior year, he admittedly became a nuisance in class. Frazier rebuked Thurman saying, "if the [the dean] wanted you to teach this course, you would be standing where I am and I would be seated where you are. . . . From this day forward you are not

[26]It is worthy of note that in 1927, four years after Thurman's Morehouse graduation, Frazier had to leave Morehouse after publishing an article entitled "The Pathology of Race Prejudice." In the article, Frazier states that race prejudice was a mental disorder. The incendiary article caused such a stir in Atlanta that a violent white mob descended upon Morehouse's grounds calling for Frazier's resignation.

[27] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, xlviii.

to speak a word in this course. . . ."[28] Initially shocked, Thurman soon embraced a more modest manner.[29] Frazier picked on Thurman at times in that course, but he acknowledged Thurman's potential as a scholar and gave Thurman an "A" for the course in part because of the paper wrote on the profit sharing system of clothing manufacturer Hart, Schaffner, and Marx.[30]

Thurman appeared to have worked closest with Lorimer Milton, an economics professor who had earned degrees in economics from Brown University. Although Milton had no particular interest in religion or social issues, the two "became friends instantly" and Thurman often spent time with Milton where, in Thurman's words, "our conversations ranged wide and deep."[31] Milton, primarily a businessman who later became president of Citizens Bank & Trust Company in Atlanta (one of the first black-owned banks in the United States), tried to steer Thurman away from religion as a professional pursuit and urged him to enter the business world. Thurman, however, had no attraction to corporate life despite his interest in economics. Instead, he sought to explore and understand "how economic realities shaped social interaction."[32]

Thurman's Student Activism

Thurman's experience as a Morehouse student was rich, enabling him to acquire lifelong friends and formative experiences. Similar to the esteem he earned from the faculty, his classmates held him in high regard. Ranking at the top of his class called his peers' attention to his abilities. In the 1923 Morehouse yearbook, Thurman's fellow seniors praised him for exemplifying the standards to which the college called Morehouse men. Known to his peers and

[28]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 41.
[29] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 41.
[30] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 41.
[31] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 42.
[32] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, xlix.

classmates as "Dud" due to his sloth-like speech and personality, the yearbook depicted Thurman as a "Scholar-Christian-Man. Slow in speech, large in stature, with long dangling arms, 'Dud' is a striking figure in any group. The personification of the Morehouse Ideal, a genuine Christian. His big heart and massive brain have been the repository of many student problems only to be solved and settled. . . ."[33] Thurman epitomized a combination of compassion and thoughtfulness for his classmates, standing out as a leader and counselor to them.

Morehouse had no formal student government, but each class had student officers. Most of the student life happened through students' involvement in outside social organizations such as the YMCA. Thurman served as president of Morehouse's YMCA chapter his senior year, in effect a chapter of the Colored Men's Division of the national organization. In this capacity, Thurman was regarded "as the religious leader on campus," which in turn influenced students' view of him as their "ideal of a minister. . . ."[34]

Thurman's role as the Morehouse student YMCA president was an important one. As YMCA historian David Setran pointed out in *The College "Y": Student Religion in the Era of Secularism* that by the turn of the 20th century they had cemented its place as fixture in American college life. The student YMCA had captured the enthusiasm and interest of student leaders on college campuses around the country. Students and administrators alike found value in the YMCA, which "had established a near monopoly on student religious life" as it helped students cultivate a practical Christianity that was essentially connected to the progressive temperament of higher education.[35]

[33] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 25.
[34] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 25.
[35] David P. Setran, *The College "Y": Student Religion in the Era of Secularism* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2007), 153.

Thurman also joined the pacifist organization the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), founded in 1915 by the Quaker minister A. J. Muste, settlement house leader Jane Addams, and 66 other activists opposing World War I. They formed this body based on their belief that "as Christians, we are forbidden to wage war."[36] As the FOR grew, it viewed war as part of the larger problem of violence in general. According to Joseph Kosek, the FOR placed "the problem of violence at the center of its theory and practice" in order to offer "an alternative model of political action" in settling disputes.[37] The FOR identified "the problem of the twentieth century" as "the problem of violence."[38] That is to say for the FOR, violence outweighed mass social perversions such as fascism, Communism, economic inequality, or race prejudice—even though these social realities breed violent attacks.[39]

Thurman was attracted to the FOR's pacifist ideals and their understanding of the relation between violence and the political, economic, and social distress of his day. The FOR's Southern field secretary, George L. Collins, recruited Thurman who believed pacifism could help him contend with racism's violent forces in the South. Thirty years later, in a sermon about the impetus to for his joining the FOR, Thurman declared:

> I became interested in peace long before I had any concern about war. This is a contradiction because to me peace meant working out reconciliation in areas where you were fighting. And I wasn't fighting in Europe and some other part of the world but I was having a very rugged time living on a little college campus in the fabulous city of Atlanta, Georgia. And peace meant, for me, not whether I would join the army, whether I would ever bear arms against some other lands, or whether I would take up arms to defend my flag. It meant nothing like that. But peace meant for me,

[36] Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 27.
[37] Kosek, *Acts of Conscience*, 1.
[38] Kosek, *Acts of Conscience*, 2.
[39] Kosek, *Acts of Conscience*, 5.

> [that] I live in Atlanta, Georgia and walk the streets of Atlanta, Georgia without fear, without hatred and without bitterness.[40]

The vicious racism that spurred Thurman's pacifism might also have been the stimulus for two of his classmates who joined him in their commitment to pacifism.

Pacifism was only part of the progressive politics that took shape among the men of Morehouse in the 1920s. *The Torch: Morehouse College Yearbook* of 1923 further records Thurman's class's left-leaning politics, noting that the 40 graduates' political identities broke down into four self-identified categories: "Twenty-two Republicans; fourteen socialists; three Indeterminists; one Bolshevist."[41] Much of these political inclinations probably arose from the combined influences of faculty members, administrators, and of outside progressive organizations' presence on campus. Thurman participated in organizations that had integrationist concerns. His personal politics had roots in his belief in the need for black uplift. Thurman articulated his convictions in his 1922 Emancipation Celebration address to the Pi-Gamma literary Society of Morehouse and Spelman. Entitled "Our Challenge," Thurman voiced sentiments that sounded notes also trumpeted by Black Nationalists. He called for black self-reliance and blacks' control of their own destiny.[42] Though he became an ardent integrationist, the young Thurman held that for too long blacks had "our thoughts, our attitudes, our ideas and in many respects, our destinies, all . . . shaped and planned by those who love us not."[43]

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[40] Howard Thurman, "Christmas and the Spirit of Survival," Sermon delivered 21 December, 1952, Boston University Howard Thurman Papers Project.

[41] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 28.

[42] In his speech, Thurman's nationalist sentiments about blacks controlling their own destiny are congruent with Black Nationalism's father, Martin Delaney. Most specifically, one finds similar lines of thought in Delaney's 1954 "Black Nationalist Manifesto." Here, Delaney stated, "No people can be free who themselves do not constitute an essential part of the ruling element of the country in which they live. . . . The liberty of no man is secure, who controls not his own political destiny. . . . A people, to be free, must necessarily be their own rulers. . . ." Martin R. Delany, "Political Destiny of the Colored Race, on the American Continent," Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention of Colored People, held at Cleveland, Ohio, August 24, 1854 (Pittsburgh, Pa.: A. A. Anderson, Printer, 1854).

[43] "Our Challenge," *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 20.

Accordingly, Thurman called for African Americans to seize their self-determination. "[Black] salvation," he declared,

> [d]epends upon our independency, our organization, our keen sense of responsibility for the future, and our jam-up efficiency, along all lines temporal and spiritual. . . . Through a series of slow and painful processes, we, the victims will soar higher, higher, and higher, above the sordid ruins of our hindrances and set our ownselves [*sic*] free. No one can do this for us![44]

This politics of black self-preservation was a practice Thurman attempted to make more tangible as his time at Morehouse came to a close.

During his senior year, Thurman endeavored to mitigate black dependence upon whites by creating a "Negro Scholarship Fund." Specifically, he wanted this fund to underwrite black male students who sought to have their degrees "validated" at white institutions. Prior to 1930, when Fisk University received accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, HBCUs were not accredited institutions of higher learning. Degrees granted from these institutions were viewed, particularly by predominantly white institutions (PWIs), as degrees that fell short of full legitimacy. In short, whites viewed HBCUs as if they bore a stamp that said "null and void." Exceptional HBCU graduates generally had their degrees "validated" by elite northern PWIs, such as Columbia, Brown, or the University of Chicago. The terms of Thurman's proposed scholarship required that graduates who had their degrees validated were to teach at an HBCU.[45]

A lifelong advocate for HBCUs, Thurman was cognizant of academic shortcomings at Morehouse and other black institutions of higher learning. Thurman noted that during his years

[44] "Our Challenge," *Thurman Papers,* Vol. 1, 22-24.
[45] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 22-24.

at Morehouse, the college did not offer a single philosophy course, though it had courses on ethics and logic which tangentially addressed philosophical subjects and thinkers. For Thurman, this lack of engagement with academic philosophy was no coincidence. Indeed, he had a remarkable suspicion of white missionaries' decision to omit formal philosophy from many black colleges' curriculum. Toward the end of his life, Thurman still held this view. "I believe the shapers of our minds," he wrote,

> [w]ith clear but limited insight into the nature of our struggle for survival and development in American life, particularly in the South, recognized the real possibility that to be disciplined in the origins and development of ideas would ultimately bring under critical judgment the society and our predicament in it. This, in turn, would contribute to our unease and restlessness, which would be disastrous, they felt, for us and for our people.[46]

Precisely because Morehouse did not offer philosophy and thus such analytical inquiry, Benjamin Mays encouraged Thurman to study philosophy.[47] It was this peaked philosophical interest that led Thurman to study philosophy at Columbia during the summer before his senior year.

Columbia

In New York in the summer of 1922, Thurman's first academic encounter with philosophy widened his view of the religious world. His experience at Columbia which included the opportunity to meet Hugh Black, summer pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian and Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary, and to receive instruction from Edwin A. Burtt, doctoral candidate in the philosophy department at Columbia, made Thurman's short time in New York a turning point in his intellectual and ministerial formation.

[46] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 43.
[47] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 43.

Attending Fifth Avenue Presbyterian on Sundays appears to have been the first time Thurman attended a white church. Thurman recalled being asked by an usher if he was a servant as he sat at a pew owned by congregants who were away for the summer. Despite that initial offense, Thurman was taken with Fifth Avenue Presbyterian because of its imposing architecture and Hugh Black's well-crafted sermons. "I had never entered a church like Fifth Avenue Presbyterian," Thurman recalled.

> To my young eyes it was vast and ornate and, above all, awe-inspiring . . . [the usher] seemed pleased that I wanted hear the famous preacher [Hugh Black]. . . . The mind of Hugh Black roamed the vast areas of biblical thought and gave listeners glad and dramatic tidings from the heart and spirit. All this, and his delightful Scottish brogue![48]

Thurman never discussed why he chose the all-white Fifth Avenue Church as his place of worship instead of a black church. He lived in Harlem during his stay and was surrounded by black churches. As a young black man with ministerial aspirations, it appears strange that Thurman did not go to the affluent Sugar Hill district of Harlem to attend Abyssinian Baptist Church, the largest black congregation in America at the time. Thurman might have heard about Hugh Black in various YMCA publications that featured Black as an outstanding preacher on the college chapel speaking circuit. Perhaps by going to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Thurman was attempting to experience religion outside of the confines of black America. Regardless, Thurman's attendance at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian gave him a chance to test social and religious boundaries in a city not under the heel of Jim Crow.

Likewise, studies at Columbia took Thurman beyond the perceived limits of many early 20th century black colleges. Thurman registered for two philosophy classes at Columbia:

[48] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 44.

"Introduction to Philosophy" with Herbert W. Schneider, a philosopher of pragmatism, and "Introduction to Reflective Thinking" under Edwin A. Burtt, later a professor at Cornell.[49] He also registered for a course on American Government with Ralph S. Boots, a political scientist. He excelled in philosophy, receiving an "A" from both Schneider and Burtt, but he found that the study of American government was not such a strong suit for him when he earned a "C."[50]

Thurman's stellar performance in philosophy was due in part to his strenuous preparation before reaching New York. He spent the weeks between the end of Morehouse's spring semester and Columbia's summer session with an uncle in Cleveland. Soon after he arrived in Cleveland, Thurman went to the 79th Street Branch Library and told the librarian of his upcoming Columbia courses and his need to prepare. "I want to be able to understand what the professors are saying in their lectures. I have never read a book on philosophy. Can you help me?" he asked.[51] The librarian took Thurman to a reading room where she designated a study space for him and brought him books she deemed useful for his preparation. The books were mostly "Greek philosophy, but there were also contemporary books on the history of European philosophy and a volume by William James."[52]

The volume by James prepared Thurman to enter the stronghold of American pragmatism, Columbia's philosophy department. Throughout the first two decades of the 1900s, Columbia's philosophy department was rivaled only by Harvard's. Columbia University President Nicolas Butler boasted that he assembled a collection of stellar philosophers, among

[49] "Introduction to Reflective Thinking" does not appear in the Columbia University 1921-1922 course catalogue for the summer of 1922. However, a course with the same title was available during the fall of 1921. Given the detail that Thurman gives about the course, it is best to follow Thurman's account.
[50] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 349.
[51] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 44.
[52] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 44.

them John Dewey, who held joint appointments in philosophy and Columbia University Teachers College. Dewey, a towering figure in the department, belonged to the philosophical school whose originators included Oliver Wendell Homes, Charles Sanders Pierce, and William James. Dewey had come to Columbia in 1904 from the University of Chicago after controversies arose when the university's president fired Dewey's wife Alice over disagreements regarding the direction of the University of Chicago's Laboratory School.

By the time Thurman arrived in 1922, Columbia's philosophy department bore the imprint of Dewey and the broader pragmatist tradition. Pragmatist philosophers Herbert Schneider, John H. Randall, Jr., and Horace L. Fries filled the faculty ranks. Schneider, Thurman's "Introduction to Philosophy" professor, was steeped in the pragmatist tradition. While Schneider's syllabi for "An Introduction to Philosophy" course syllabus no longer seems to exist, in a 1953 interview of Thurman, he remembered reading the works of Plato, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel for the class.[53] Thurman more than likely encountered a fair amount of pragmatism while in Schneider's class as well. Pragmatism stood at the center of most of Schneider's courses. According to the 1921 to 1922 course listings, he taught classes either about or together with John Dewey. His teaching load included "Psychological ethics," "Moral and political philosophy"—both team taught with Dewey—and "The social philosophy of John Dewey," "Principles of Scientific Thinking," and "Philosophers of the United States up to 1890," conducted by himself alone.[54] Thurman appears to have found further engagement with the pragmatist thinkers in his "Introduction to Reflective Thinking." Thurman later referred to this course under Edwin Burtt as "the most significant single course I ever took. . . ."[55]

[53] Jean Burden, "Howard Thurman," published in The *Atlantic* 1953, 3r.
[54] "Columbia University in the City of New York Catalogue: 1921-1922."
[55] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 44.

Later in Thurman's academic and ministerial career, he found much utility in the methods Burtt taught. He later remarked, "[Burtt's] course established for me a basic approach that I would use not only in my subsequent work as a counselor but also in thinking through the complex and complicated problems I would encounter in my personal life as a social being. As a tool of the mind, there is no way by which the value of this course can be measured."[56] As Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt have pointed out, Thurman's own version of "Introduction to Reflective Thinking" was the first class he offered while he was a professor at Spelman and Morehouse in 1928.[57] Although Thurman's syllabi cannot be located, his class likely followed the lead of Burtt's 1922 course.

Burtt utilized John Dewey's *How We Think* (1910) and *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking* (1923), an edited volume created by the philosophy faculty of Columbia. It seems that the two books were read in tandem. *How We Think* was used as a tool to teach students critical interrogation and problem solving. In the book, Dewey shows readers the ways in which they can improve thinking through the use of inquiry, hence rendering them a method for evaluating, accepting, or rejecting beliefs. Here, Dewey called readers to evaluate problems, ideas, and beliefs in the same way a scientist might assess a scientific hypothesis, coming to a position "not on its own direct account, but through something else which stands as witness, evidence, proof, voucher, [and] warrant . . . as [the] *ground[s] of belief*."[58]

For Dewey, one arrived at grounded beliefs through testing them out in the world and ultimately accepting or rejecting what had been presented. Dewey thoroughly described the

[56] Thurman, *With Head and* Heart, 44.
[57] Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011, Kindle Edition), 17.
[58] John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., Publishers, 1910, Kindle Edition), 7.

process in which a person came to a belief in the sixth chapter of *How We Think*, entitled "The Analysis of a Complete Act of Thought."

Dewey's method of inquiry began with identifying a felt difficulty and defining its location and definition.[59] This felt difficulty could be an idea or problem or an ambiguity in one's position regarding said idea or problem.[60] Once the problem had been identified, the next steps for Dewey was to propose a solution and reason the possible implications—pros, cons, benefits, and shortcomings—of an idea or problem.[61] Finally, Dewey invited readers to experiment and observe the ways in which an idea plays out, ultimately coming to a solution.[62] For Dewey, this rubric could be used in the solving and engaging of a bevy of issues in fields such as science, mathematics, and religion.

Dewey's work complemented *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking.* In *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking*, the authors said that they aimed to "emphasize the part which thought plays in the formation of beliefs, and to stimulate . . . readers to a more lively realization of the road to a more congenial world which lies open to those who think."[63] The Columbia philosophers went on to use Dewey's method of inquiry as a schema for critical thinking and problem solving. More specifically, the textbook worked through examples such as "treating a sick man," the Ptolemy vs. Copernican debate, traditional vs. critical views of the Old Testament, and other issues.

[59]Dewey, *How We Think*, 910.
[60]Dewey, *How We Think*, 910.
[61]Dewey, *How We Think*, 910.
[62]Dewey, *How We Think*, 910.
[63]Associates of Columbia University Philosophy Department, *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), 1.

Howard Thurman emerged from the course changed forever. He sought to study religion using the method with which the "Introduction to Reflective Thinking" course interrogated its subjects. Proof of the course's impression on Thurman can be found in his classmates' description of him in *The Torch* as the "one who shall furnish us with a rational and practical Christianity."[64] As we will see later in Thurman's Rochester Seminary years, Thurman was concerned with making Christianity malleable to rational thought.

Conclusion

Thurman's time at Morehouse and Columbia prepared him for his time at Rochester Seminary. Working under the influence of his Morehouse professors, Thurman chose to go to Rochester, a white Northern theologically liberal institution, to train as a minister. While at Rochester, Thurman was able to become further ingratiated within major fixtures of the religious left—some of which he had already been acquainted with at Morehouse—among them the YMCA, Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) and Student Fellowship for Christian Life Services (SFCL). Finally, as we will see in the following two chapters, Columbia was only Thurman's first of many encounters with pragmatism; he became even more acquainted with this branch of philosophy and its thinkers during his time at Rochester Seminary and Haverford College, respectively.

[64]"The Torch," *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 44.

Chapter 3: The Rochester Years

As Thurman's time at Morehouse came to an end, he faced a number of major decisions. The possibility of remaining in Atlanta and joining the Morehouse faculty arose when John Hope offered Thurman an instructorship. He also could have had his degree validated at the University of Chicago or at Columbia University, and then walked through the doors such credentials would open to other institutions and pastorates. Thurman, however, decided to fan his ministerial flames that sparked in his late adolescence and determined to attend seminary. Thurman was taught at Morehouse by faculty members who had earned degrees from Northern white institutions, and he aimed to follow them by gaining Northern white liberal theological training.

His first application to a white Northern seminary was met with the bitter reminder that Jim Crow policies did not exist only in states below the Mason-Dixon Line. Newton Theological Seminary in Massachusetts reviewed his application in light of their race-prejudiced admissions policies and advised him in their rejection letter to take up theological studies at Virginia Union College, a black seminary. There, the letter stated, he would "be able to secure the kind of training [he] would need to provide religious leadership for [his] people."[1] However, Thurman did not apply to Virginia Union, because he wanted to follow the theological path of his mentor, Mordecai Johnson who had gone North for further theological education. Ultimately, Thurman chose to attend Johnson's alma mater, Rochester Theological Seminary where he was accepted.

Thurman's admission to Rochester Seminary was not free of racial dissonance. Rochester had its own form of Jim Crow policies at the time of Thurman's application. Although the school admitted black students, it placed a limit on the number of black students that could attend at one

[1] Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: the Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Mariner Books, 1981), 45.

time. As Thurman recalled, Rochester's admission letter "made it clear to me that I was privileged to be included in the new class. . . . it was the policy of the seminary to have no more than two Negroes enrolled in any given year." Thurman appears not to have had a close relationship with the other black student because he never mentioned him in his reflections of the time.

Rochester

The Rochester years were crucial in Thurman's formation as an intellectual. He arrived with a deep intellectual hunger. Rochester gave Thurman access to the largest library of his academic career. Although he had attended Columbia in the summer between his junior and senior years at Morehouse, he did not have full access to Butler library because of his status as a summer student. The holdings at Morehouse were so limited that Thurman and a classmate had read the entire collection by the time they graduated. For Thurman, Rochester's library served as his "refuge and [his] joy."[2] He indulged his voracious intellectual appetite, feverishly reading deep into the night, during breaks between classes, on long street car rides, and even in the bathroom. Thurman's obsession with learning was further stimulated by the Rochester faculty, who often gave him supplementary readings to advance his study of the Christian faith. Thurman also gained theological sophistication, heavily influenced by his study of church history with Conrad R. Moehlman and philosophical theology with George Cross. Moehlman led Thurman to embrace a social gospel hermeneutic, and Cross pushed him to embrace American Protestant modernism.[3]

[2] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 47.

[3] Following William Hutchinson in *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, I define the modernist impulse as the conscious act in of religious liberalism to "[adapt] . . . religious ideas to modern culture." These modern forces include, but are not limited to, modern scientific discoveries—such as Charles Darwin's evolutionary

Thurman's time at Rochester passed on the heels of its most famous professor's death, Walter Rauschenbusch. Though Rauschenbusch had died, his legacy loomed large over Rochester. Rauschenbusch's social gospel continued to inspire generations of seminarians and Christian activists at Rochester and beyond. His social gospel taught that "the essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relationships . . . in accordance to God's will."[4] Rauschenbusch's social gospel was steeped in the historical critical method of biblical study.[5] Rauschenbusch's major works—*Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), *Dare We Be Christians* (1914), and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917)—used this method to argue that the Bible, and Jesus especially, presents a divine mandate for social justice. More specifically, Rauschenbusch pointed to the Old Testament prophets and Jesus Christ as biblical figures who articulated and embodied the divine mandate. Thus Rauschenbusch believed that the work of a Christian minister was to spread this message of justice—this social gospel—in order to usher in the kingdom of God on earth.

When Thurman reached Rochester in 1923, the seminary still bore Rauschenbusch's distinct imprint. Immediately after Rauschenbusch's death, his protégé Conrad Moehlman succeeded him as professor of church history. Moehlman's work in the 1920s resembled that of Rauschenbusch. At times, much of Moehlman's work came closer to biblical scholarship rather than traditional church history. Moehlman's early monographs, "The Combination Theos Soter as Explanation of the Primitive Christian Use of Soter as Title and Name" (his 1920 dissertation), *Is the Study of the History of Christianity Practical?* (1925), and *A Syllabus of the*

theory, biblical higher criticism, and philosophy. See William R. Hutchison*, The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 2.

[4] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: The Macmillan Company 1907), xiii.

[5] The historical critical method of biblical study is a literary approach to the Bible whereby one studies the time period that the author of a text is discussing as well as the time period in which an author is writing. Scholars who used this method believed that they would grasp a greater meaning of what the text conveyed.

History of Christianity (1926), privilege the historical critical biblical method over the study of the institutional history of Christianity or the cultural historical context of the emergence of Christianity in the ancient world. Even in his later work, *How Jesus Became God: An Historical Study of the Life of Jesus to the Age of Constantine* (1960), Moehlman favored a historical critical biblical account rather than delving into a study of patristics or the locations and conditions that shaped the beliefs of the church. Moehlman's concern with a historical view of the Bible likely was reflected in "The Religious Values of the New Testament" and other courses he offered at Rochester.[6]

Although Thurman learned the historical critical method from Mordecai Johnson, his knowledge of biblical history grew greater at Rochester. In addition to learning historical critical analysis from Moehlman, his knowledge of the Bible deepened from instruction by Rochester's biblical studies professors, Ernest Parsons and Justin W. Nixon. In courses such as "Hebrew History," "History of Christianity," "Religion of the New Testament," "Hebrew Family," and "Life of Jesus," Thurman expanded his historical knowledge of the biblical world and Christianity.[7]

Ironically, the professor at Rochester who made the greatest impression on Thurman did not belong among the social gospel devotees, systematic theology professor George Cross. Cross had a reputation among the seminarians and faculty for challenging orthodox theology. Augustus H. Strong, Rochester Seminary's president from 1872–1912, considered Cross's hiring "the greatest calamity that [had] come to the seminary since the foundation" because Cross introduced "[a] skeptical, and anti-Christian element into its teaching, the result of which was

[6] "Rochester Seminary Course Catalogue 1921-1922."
[7] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 350-351.

only evil."[8] Cross loomed as a threatening theological modernist, pushing the students to question the basis of every Christian belief.

Cross was a product of the University of Chicago Divinity School's kind of liberalism. At Chicago, Cross studied under the leading liberal theologians at the turn of the 20th century—George Burman Foster and Shailer Mathews. These religious scholars were influenced by the German theologian Albrecht Ritschl who synthesized historical critical study of the Bible with church history and practical, moral judgments in relation to the modern world. Further, "the Chicago school" amalgamated Ritschl's approach to theology with the empiricism of pragmatic philosophers, especially John Dewey who taught at University of Chicago until 1905.[9] An edited volume penned by the University of Chicago's Divinity School faculty entitled *A Guide to Christian Religion* articulated their understanding of the need to recalibrate Christian theology in light of modernity:

> . . . [T]he Divinity school today is attempting to organize the education of ministers of the gospel and of religious teachers . . . with reference to many situations and problems which formerly did not exist. The history of Christianity can no longer be studied in isolation from the total history of which it is a part. The study of the Bible must be undertaken with a full understanding of all that is involved in the processes of historical criticism. Systematic theology must consider religious beliefs in relation to the modern scientific and philosophical ideas which are regnant.[10]

Indeed, the Chicago school's faculty as well as its modernist aims were a product of university president William Rainey Harper's broader vision for the school. Harper later stated that it was his interest to create a school of theology "which shall partake exclusively of a scientific

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[8] Grant Wacker, *Augustus H. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), 106.
[9] Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 178-181.
[10]Gerald Birney Smith, ed., *A Guide to Christian Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), 3.

character," while emphasizing "the practical side of this same work."[11] Harper's modernist ideal was further buttressed by the divinity school's dean, Shailer Mathews, as he sought to promote "a religion that is as intellectually tenable as it is spiritually inspiring."[12]

The major figure during Cross's tenure at the University of Chicago's Divinity School was George Burman Foster, a Rochester Seminary trained theologian who had left the conservative theological fold by the 1890s. Historian Gary Dorrien points out that early in Foster's career he condemned the idea of religion's infallibility "calling for the 'complete rejection of the false principle of authority.'" For Foster, said Dorrien, "only the 'true religion' of individual spiritual freedom had any sovereign right in the kingdom of religion."[13] Foster called for a second reformation of the Protestant church in order to disentangle Protestantism from the remnants of its Catholic roots. The means by which he pursued this reformation were two-fold: (1) he sought a Christianity that viewed Jesus as "like God" but not a demi-God as some Christians believed; and (2) he pictured a Christianity that made the tools of modernism—science and philosophy—its servants. In effect, Foster's skepticism of Christ's divinity, rejection of biblical inerrancy, and incorporation of the latest science and philosophy within theology followed the path of liberal religious scholarship in America, spurred on in the early 19th century by Ellery William Channing in his *Unitarian Christianity* (1819). From Cross's published works, one can surmise that he embraced Foster's theological liberalism. In a 1921 review of an edited volume of Foster's posthumously published *George Burman Foster's Lectures on Theology*, Cross indicated his agreement with Foster's liberal theological views. However, Cross rejected Foster's notion that Christianity and modernism were so opposed that Christianity had to

[11] Conrad Cherry, *Hurrying to Zion* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 7.
[12] Shailer Mathews, *Faith of Modernism* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1924), 13.
[13] Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity*, 157.

dominate the discourse, instead finding that "[s]cience must be free and so must faith. If possible, they must be reconciled and unified. . . ."[14]

Throughout Cross's life, he attempted to reconcile a person's faith with the findings of science and philosophy. His *What Is Christianity* and *Creative Christianity* evidenced this effort to connect Christianity and modernity. Modernity for Cross created an "imperativeness [*sic*] of thinking through afresh the essential problems of theology."[15] Christianity at its best had to immerse itself deeply in the pools of daily life. "The organizing genius," he wrote,

> of the Christian faith manifests itself in the reshaping of the forms of conduct or morality, the political affairs [of] civil constitution, the traditional theories of life or popular philosophy, and the manifestation of the spirit of reverence or worship current among any people. The faith becomes institutionalized in this way. It also becomes institutionalized in the churches which seek to be a direct embodiment of the Christian faith. These have their own forms of government, doctrine and worship, which commonly come to be viewed as essential to the faith itself.[16]

Cross also agreed that the idealism of pre-World War I progressive Christians failed to meet the needs of an ultimately tragic moment. He called Christians—particularly theologians—to adapt to and integrate their faith with modernity, including its tragedies, new scientific discoveries, and other realities. To this end, Cross believed it would help if theologians sought to "find the everlasting in the present and life in the midst of death."[17]

At Rochester, Howard Thurman steeped himself in Cross's liberal theological outlook by taking every course Cross offered. In the courses "Doctrine of Man," "Doctrine of God,"

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[14] George Cross, "Review: *George Burman Foster's Lectures on Theology*," The Journal of Religion, University of Chicago, Vol. 1, No. 6 (Nov., 1921), pp. 657-662 659.
[15] George Cross, *What is Christianity?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918), 7.
[16] George Cross, *Creative Christianity: A Study in the Genius of the Christian Faith* (New York: The McMillian Company, 1922), 9.
[17] Cross, *Creative Christianity*, 163.

"Genesis of Catholic and Protestant Orthodoxy," and "Christian Finality," Cross pushed Thurman and his classmates to rethink their tacit theological assumptions and presuppositions by "dismantl[ing] the structures of orthodoxy with scrupulous scholarship."[18] Thurman was at once enraged and fascinated by Cross whom he viewed as "iconoclastic, ruthlessly dethroning our inherited orthodoxies."[19] Though Cross dissented from orthodox Christianity, he also came to orthodoxy's defense. Specifically, Cross did not allow students to criticize traditional dogmas unless they could articulate an equally supportive argument for the very article of faith.[20]

In private meetings with Cross, Thurman became more acquainted and comfortable with Cross's combative teaching style. In his first semester with Cross, Thurman took two sets of notes. On one side of the notebook, he wrote what Cross said in lectures; on the other, he wrote questions and disagreements that arose for him in relation to the lecture. On Saturdays Thurman met with Cross to discuss questions and disagreements so noted. "With the utmost patience and understanding," Thurman said, "he would reduce my arguments to ash."[21] Cross's ability to undo Thurman intellectually did not break Thurman's confidence. In fact, he found new resolve, "I would leave, thoroughly humbled, only to appear the following week armed for combat."[22]

Cross's close mentorship led Thurman to return to his original college in hope of fashioning "a rational and practical Christianity."[23] Cross guided Thurman to accept the realities of modernity as a primary object of theological investigation. Evidence that Thurman developed his modernist and practical bent appear in the essays he wrote for Cross's classes. In these

[18] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 350-351.; Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 54.
[19] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 54.
[20] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 54.
[21] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 55.
[22] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 55.
[23] *Thurman Paper*s, Vol. 1, 25.

papers, Thurman investigated the basis for Christian beliefs and practices while making strong cases for modernist Christian alternatives. He wrote on such topics as the virgin birth of Jesus, premarital sex, and the rationality of a supreme God concept. Thurman rejected the virgin birth of Jesus by using the method of historical higher criticism. Juxtaposing the virgin birth of Jesus with those of Greek and Egyptian deities, Thurman reasoned that the biblical story was derived from prior mythologies.[24] Thurman's Bachelor of Divinity thesis, "The Basis of Sex Morality: An Inquiry into the Attitude toward Premarital Sexual Morality among Various Peoples and an Analysis of Its True Basis," further indicates of his shift toward a modern, non-dogmatic view of Christianity. After outlining the arguments in various cultures and religions regarding premarital sex, Thurman concluded that teaching the immorality of pre-marital sex amounted to a way that men—by way of male clergy—dominated women.[25] Heavily influenced by his reading of the white South African feminist poet Olive Schreiner, Thurman called his readers to understand sex as more than merely an instrument for reproduction. He held, quoting Schreiner, sex to be "'the great sacrament of life . . . . it may be the most beautiful sacrament between two souls that have no thought of children.'"[26]

Thurman's paper "Can It Be Truly Said That the Existence of a Supreme Spirit Is a Scientific Hypothesis?" is the clearest and earliest example of Thurman wrestling with the idea of reconciling religion with the ideals of philosophy and modernity. Thurman argued that a person can arrive at religious convictions empirically.[27] He explained: "A scientific hypothesis is a scientific belief, it is [an] assumption, it is a faith. The idea of the existence of a Supreme Being

[24]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 31-35.
[25]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 71-104.
[26]"The Basis of Sex Morality: An Inquiry into the Attitude toward Premarital Sexual Morality among Various Peoples and an Analysis of Its True Basis," *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 103.
[27]"Can It Be Truly Said That the Existence of a Supreme Spirit Is a Scientific Hypothesis?" *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 54-63.

is an assumption, it is a belief, it is a faith."[28] Howard Thurman thought religious thinkers ought to examine their beliefs in the same way as a scientist, testing them in the laboratory and coming to conclusions through experience. Thurman's attempt to find the empirical value of religious experiences was a carryover from his summer at Columbia University, specifically E.A. Burtt's philosophy course, "Introduction to Reflective Thinking." In fact, in Thurman's description of the process of creating a hypothesis about half of the paper's content is plagiarized from *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking*, the edited volume Burtt had his students read in the course.[29] While Thurman's plagiarism throws into question a measure of his early scholarly integrity, it does not diminish the paper's value in illuminating Thurman's budding intellectual interest, preferences, and influences. On the whole, the paper substantiates Thurman's interest in the constructive contributions that he thought pragmatism offered theology. From the paper for Cross, it is evident that Thurman's attraction to pragmatism expanded beyond John Dewey and began to include the works of William James, a step which began his intellectual turn to mysticism. In the essay, Thurman quoted from James's *Varieties of the Religious Experience* to underscore the significance of religiosity. He ends the paper on a mystical note, referencing James:

> William James said, "By being religious we establish ourselves in the possession of Ultimate Reality at the only point at which reality has been given us to guard." WE DROP INTO OURSELVES TO FIND THE RAISON D'ETRE OF OUR AFFIRMATION AND WE SPEND THE REST OF OUR LIVES SEEKING VERIFICATION WHICH WILL COVER THE TOTAL RANGE OF ALL OUR EXPERIENCE.[30] [Emphasis original]

[28]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 61.
[29]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 54.
[30]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 62.

Ironically, Thurman's studies with Cross, which were to make him more thoroughly rational, led him to take his first steps in the direction of the mysticism for which he became famous much later.

Student Activism

Thurman's modernist theological ideals never found explicit voice in the political writings of his seminary days. The social gospel primarily fueled the theology Thurman presented to the public in sermons and articles addressed to mostly white liberal religious circles. His seminary essays about theology and philosophy do not indicate much about his strong attraction to liberal politics. Perhaps as a seminarian Thurman struggled to find or create the right audience to whom he could address his liberal theological message. One is hard pressed to find black or white churches that would have been receptive during the 1920s—the heyday of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy and several church heresy trials—to hear Thurman's rejection of the virgin birth or his defense of premarital sex. Thurman knew well of many churches' distain for liberal theology, especially after he was nearly denied ordination for his stated belief in evolution. Instead of pressing congregations to theological claims that related religion to modernity, Thurman preached a racially aware social gospel to black and white congregations.

At Rochester Seminary, Thurman took steps toward becoming a public intellectual. He taught adult classes at the local black chapter of the YWCA—there being no black YMCA in Rochester. He also made a close connection with the local black church, Mt. Olivet Baptist, pastored by the Rev. Dr. James E. Rose, a Rochester graduate. Although members of the black community as a whole opened their homes to Thurman, he mainly found his place as an activist and a preacher in the larger white communities of western New York. Thurman's white

classmates recommended him as a preacher and lecturer to local churches in the Rochester area. Working in this capacity Thurman not only began exercising his ministerial activism, he also received financial support, being paid for lectures and sermons that addressed race in America.

Despite Thurman's being welcomed the pastors of white churches, his presence in these spaces transgressed America's sacred segregated Sunday eleven o'clock hour and occasioned the threat of physical harm upon him. Thurman recalled one instance when a white pastor told him of the hostility expressed against him for inviting a black man to preach, and cautioned Thurman that he, too, might be threatened. As Thurman approached the church he sensed "violence in the air."[31] The church's men stood defensively shoulder to shoulder lining the walk way to the church.[32] Even in the face of such intimidation, Thurman preached his sermon on "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit says the Lord" (Zechariah 4:6).[33]

The ever present threat of violence from the Ku Klux Klan faced Thurman as he traveled throughout western New York. The Klan was reaching its peak of activity in the mid-1920s with nearly four million members nationwide in 1925.[34] Its power extended far beyond Southern states, growing in the Northeast and the Midwest. Although blacks had always been targeted by the Klan, the western New York branches primarily aimed their sights on Jews and Catholics.[35] Nevertheless, Thurman ran the risk of being harassed, threatened, injured, or killed. According to Thurman, the Klan made their presence known to him as he traveled in western New York. After

[31]Landrom Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2," (San Francisco: The Howard Educational Trust, Video Cassette, 1978).
[32]Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[33]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 51.
[34]Rory McVeigh, "Structural Incentives for Conservative Mobilization: Power Devaluation and the Rise of the Ku Klux Klan, 1915–1925," Social Forces, Vol. 77, no. 4 (June 1999), 1463.
[35]Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

delivering his last sermon of a semester at Rochester, a white man approached him. The man had tracked Thurman's work closely, Thurman recalled their menacing encounter:

> "I have heard practically every sermon you have preached since last fall. I know where you went, what your subjects were, and how many people were in your audience." He took a small notebook from his pocket to show that he had such record. . . I knew him to be a klansman. . . .[36]

Thurman also met race prejudice within the majority, white progressive Christian student organizations to which he belonged, especially the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) and the Student Fellowship for Christian Life Service (SFCLS). Although sources do not tell about Thurman's daily participations in these organizations, his contributions to their periodicals and bulletins indicate how he perceived their lack of race awareness from their position of privilege. In these publications, Thurman wrote deliberately as a black man in America who refashioned the social gospel to correspond to the realities of his experience. In these early political writings Thurman juxtaposed the social element of Jesus' ministry to the treatment of blacks in America. Applying the biblical hermeneutic he was developing under Moelhman's influence, Thurman prodded his white audiences to treat black Americans equally in Christian endeavors.

Thurman's racially concerned essays took on important meaning in the context of the majority white SVM and SFCLS. The SVM was an offshoot of the YMCA, founded in 1888 to create an avenue for students to prepare for missionary work around the globe. In these missions organizations students attempted to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a world that they understood to be under attack by spiritual and social decay. The SFCLS, similar to the SVM focused more on the domestic field for their work. In fact, the SFCLS grew out of the SVM to recruit and unite students dedicated to Christian service in the United States and its continental

[36]Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

territories. The SFCLS worked "hand in hand with the [SVM] to urge students to give their lives in service to Christ in the whole world."[37]

The early SVM carried within it a deep-seated element of American exceptionalism. As religious historian Heather Warren has pointed out, during these years the SVM had a "sense of urgency and [believed] that God had put America in the vanguard [because] Europe was too marred by its legacy of tyranny; Africa and Asia were heathen lands."[38] This attitude of national arrogance coupled with a generous helping of American racism among the predominantly white student missionary groups at white protestant and public institutions of higher education to ensure its supposed "superiority."

In the mid-1920s, Thurman's generation of the SVM started to take on racism as a theological problem within their own ranks as well as abroad. Thurman published essays in the SVM's and the SFCLS's periodicals, and he levied heavy criticism of the racist culture embedded in these student Christian organizations and American society. His January, 1925, essay "Let Ministers Be Christians" called the SVM and SFCLS toward a Christianity that held "*all of life*" to be sacred.[39] Thurman argued that the Christianity promoted by many of his white peers and most white Christians was "so shut up in water-tight compartments that scarcely a drop of it [was] allowed to seep through to give strength and vigor to the thirsty, dying plants of brotherliness in the garden of [everyday] living."[40] He recounted moments when white students in these organizations struggled with or were completely oblivious to their racism. Thurman

[37] Jessie Dodge White, "The Emergence of the Student Fellowship for Christian Life Service," *Christian Education*, Vol. 5, no. 10 (JULY, 1922), 309-310.
[38]Heather Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14.
[39]"Let Ministers Be Christians!," *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 44.
[40]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 44.

heard a young white missionary tell her white peer, "I can't understand why I am going to Africa as a missionary; I hate niggers."[41] But all was not bleak; hope shone through in discreet and encouraging experiences within the student Christian movement. One such episode occurred when Thurman met a white Christian Student Volunteer who said to him, "Brother[,] I am from Texas but since I have been here I have understood Jesus Christ better and I can say the truth when I call you Brother, I have [a] long way to go yet and I need your help."[42] This encounter with a student from Texas pointed to the broader point of his essay. For Thurman, white racist Christians needed simply to "[understand] Jesus Christ better" in order to see blacks and other people of color as fully deserving their Christian acts of justice and equality.[43] He believed that ministers "must be the Voice of God that calls the peoples to repentance and challeng[es] them to a higher life in experience than they have achieved already."[44] Although Thurman spoke in generalities through most of the article, in the latter part he pointed directly to the inactions of white ministers who held American racism safely away at arm's length. Such clergy either entirely ignored racism or conveniently left race out of their religious vision when they engaged in Christian acts of justice.

Thurman's biblical challenge to these ministers' avoidant behaviors derived from Matthew 25:40, the parable of great judgment in which Jesus declares "In so far as ye did it to one of these brothers of mine, even to the least of them you did it to me."[45] Thurman believed that this scripture passage should pervade all aspects of private and social life, including race relations. For Thurman, this text applied to everyone, "not to Nordics alone," as he wrote:

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[41]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 43.
[42]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 43.
[43]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 43.
[44]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 44.
[45]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 44.

> God identified with human life! . . . Do those words mean that every time a Negro is lynched and burned God is lynched and burned? Do they mean that God is held as a peon in certain parts of this land of "Liberty"? Do they mean that God [is] discriminated against, segregated and packed in Jim Crow cars?[46]

To Thurman, the critical question for Christians generally and white ministers specifically was whether or not they would "have the courage to deliberately include the teaching of brotherliness toward the Negro neighbor as an integral part of religion? Or will [they] just dwell on glittering generalities about loving all men"—in effect, bleaching out the differences to ignore the racial divide and avoid crossing it.[47] In no uncertain terms Thurman attacked the color-blind racist liberalism he met in white colleagues, mentors, and student peers.

Thurman further criticized such "a general love of all men" as a major blind spot in many articulations of Christianity.[48] For Thurman anyone who had an understanding of the gospel that left blacks outside of their theological framework did not live as a fully authentic Christian. Failure to address blacks' painful experiences or to examine theology from a color-concerned standpoint allowed such Christians to "[p]ussy-foot and [wobble]" around the issues of race relations in America and "the [message found] in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. . . ."[49] Ultimately, Thurman found that if churches in America did not include blacks in their overall understanding of the Gospel, then "Jesus is still unknown in this land that is covered with churches erected in his honor—absente Christo."[50]

A Posture for Academic Validity

[46] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 44.
[47] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 46.
[48] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 46.
[49] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 46.
[50] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 46.

Thurman's unofficial place as a racial expert within white progressive Christian organizations raises concerns when considering his de-racialized academic work. Why was Thurman able to discuss race in progressive Christian organizations, yet in his academic work he only used his pen to address high philosophical and theological issues apart from race? Nowhere in Thurman's seminary work does he take up the issue of race. Thurman appears to have taken on two identities, budding color-blind intellectual by day and race man by night.

Most likely, Thurman's inattention to racial realities in his academic work arose from the fact that Rochester Seminary—even as it stood as the major bastion of the social gospel—was not a safe place for racial discussions. Rochester, like many other seminaries of its era, refused to spot racial justice on its radar. For example, Thurman's favorite professor, George Cross, warned him against becoming a "race man." He gave Thurman a stern warning in their final meeting. Painfully Thurman recounted the moment:

> He told me that I had superior gifts and that he thought it probable that I could make an original contribution to the spiritual life for the times. . . . He [then] went to the heart of his concern. "You are a very sensitive Negro man," he said, "and doubtless feel under obligation to put all the weight of your mind and spirit at the disposal of the struggle of your own people for full citizenship. But let me remind you that all social questions are transitory in nature and it would be a terrible waste for you to limit your creative energy to the solution of the race problem. . . . Give yourself to the timeless issues of the human spirit. . . . Perhaps I have no right to say this . . . because as a white man I can never know what it is to be in your situation." I pondered the meaning of his words, and wondered what kind of response I could make to this man who did not know that a man and his black skin must face the "timeless issues of the human spirit."[51]

[51] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 60.

Cross's advice articulated all too clearly the so-called color-blind and color-dismissive racial outlook that pervaded liberal theological education.

Rochester Seminary and Cross did not stand alone in refusing to engage racism as a theological problem in the early decades of the 20th century. Rochester Seminary, like other leading liberal seminaries, was a microcosm of this so-called race-blind theology. Walter Rauschenbusch, the noted social gospel theologian and the face of Rochester Seminary for more than a decade, avoided racial issues most of his career and on rare occasions even made racist statements himself. In an anonymous letter to donors and in a 1902 Rochester graduation address, Rauschenbusch warned against whites losing their hold on social power. He cautioned that "the blacks of the South and the seething yellow flocks beyond the Pacific" would usurp white political power if whites did not maintain their grip on it.[52] While Rauschenbusch did not create the racial tensions at Rochester, his failure to see his own racism and criticize it in others probably helped perpetuate the racist culture Thurman had encountered.

During Thurman's Rochester years, racial tensions were especially pronounced. Although by the 1920s Rochester Seminary had graduated a number of notable black alumni, due to its Jim Crow admissions policy Thurman was only one of two black students at the school. This made Rochester a lonely place for Thurman. In a 1924 essay published in the *Student Challenge*, the magazine of the SFSLS, entitled "College and Color," Thurman spoke candidly about the intense anxieties this racially oppressive environment produced for him and other black students:

[52]*Annual Report of the Baptist Congress*, 1888, "for I believe" quote 87; Walter Rauschenbusch (unsigned, "What Shall We Do with the Germans?" (pamphlet, 1895); see Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 93.

> . . . [W]hat is going on in the mind of the Negro student on your campus in the face of discrimination and prejudice. . . . [w]hen during the opening days before seats are assigned, all the chairs in his immediate vicinity are marked by an invisible [sign, reading] "unclean"? . . . [W]hen purchasing his theater ticket he hears two students, perhaps classmates, debating as to whether they shall buy orchestra seats or seats for "Nigger heaven" [the balcony]? . . . [W]hen from the lecture platform there comes the eternally humiliating joke at the expense of the entire Negro group? What is going on in his mind in the face of blatant outburst of "white supremacy"?[53]

Thurman went on to write that he only wished to be treated with the same respect shown to white students. He encouraged white students to embrace and display "an attitude which says that a [person] of another race is essentially myself, and [that] I feel toward him fundamentally as if he were myself."[54]

Because of the pervasive racism at Rochester, Thurman never felt fully a part of the seminary community. He noted that the majority white student body of the seminary held an immediate social advantage over him as they maneuvered through this academic world. "Whether they were intellectually gifted, or mediocre," he observed, "the fact remained that this world belonged to them."[55] Thurman's sense that he was an outsider in this white world was further bolstered by professors and lecturers who deliberated over the politics and polities of their churches as if he was "innately a person apart," invisible to them at such times.[56]

If the seminarians and faculty did not see Thurman belonging to their Christian community, they certainly did not see themselves belonging to Thurman's Christian community. Rochester offered no courses that indicated even the slightest interest in the lives and experiences

[53] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 37-38.
[54] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 38.
[55] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, (New York: Mariner Books, 1981), 46.
[56] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 47.

of black people, least of all their churches. The absence of courses about people of color signals Rochester's disinterest in Thurman or any other black person preparing to teach and minister in a majority black community. Thurman had to contend with the peculiar expectation of his professors that he was to make theological meaning out of his black existence entirely through the theology and philosophy of the white European canon.

The absence of race as a theological topic in Rochester's curriculum ought to come as no surprise. Scholars who studied blacks as religious subjects did not become a permanent fixture of higher education until the 1960s, when black scholars such as Charles Long, C. Eric Lincoln, Joseph Washington, James Cone, and Albert Raboteau took appointments at predominantly white liberal seminaries and universities. Black academics of the generation before Thurman, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Mordecai Johnson, also did not have black or white faculty members to guide them in the scholarly study of black life; but they produced papers, theses, and dissertations that engaged black life in America. This previous generation's scholarly work on race as budding scholars leads one to query why Thurman did not entertain racial issues in his papers as a student.

There could be a bevy of answers to this question. Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt have suggested Thurman might have significantly doubted what white liberals could teach him about race in America.[57] After all, Rochester's president, Clarence Barbour, was acutely ignorant of black culture and deeply insensitive to racism. Once invited by President Barbour to speak to a missionary group, Thurman asked what his topic ought to be. Barbour replied, "I would describe a Negro camp meeting. The ladies will find that most interesting."[58] Barbour's

[57] Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 27.
[58] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 48.

stereotype notably conveyed extreme misunderstanding of Thurman, and it showed how ignorant Barbour was about black religious life. Thurman was a black man reared in the 20th century when blacks had had their own church buildings for quite some time, and thus he "knew very little about Negro camp meetings. . . ."[59] Barbour did not view blacks as a potential part of his religious experience; hence, he had no need to engage the particulars of their churches. Rochester's administration's and faculty's disregard for black religious life made it hard for black students to expect them to join or add to any substantive racial conversations.

Thurman's Rochester papers were not unique in the way they did not address race. Well-known later black theologians, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Cone who also attended elite, white theological schools, likewise never engaged black topics or race in their seminary and doctoral studies. King's doctoral papers from Boston University show him wrestling with Friedrich Nietzsche and Paul Tillich's conceptions of Christian love. In none of his papers did King debate the theological bankruptcy of Jim Crow America at Boston University, the bastion of American Personalism. James Cone, as a student at Garrett Biblical Institute and Northwestern University, focused on the Swiss theologian Karl Barth's dense *Dogmatics*, with no attention to race—not even the implications of Barth's thought for theological inquiry into racism.

Perhaps Thurman, King, and Cone fell prey to the insecurities that have habitually inhibited black students as they navigated the white world of academia. In hostile environments such as Rochester Seminary in the 1920s, black students frequently felt the need to overcompensate intellectually. Under these circumstances, a black student may have "postured

[59] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 48.

for academic validity," studying only white subjects to prove to their professors and peers that they are at least intellectually equal if not superior. Comparable to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's notion of "the politics of respectability" used by many blacks in the early 20th century and beyond, black students presented their professors and peers with "[a] 'Public Negro Self' . . . a self presented to the world as worthy of respect."[60] Given that black students knew their professors did not respect scholarly racial discourse, many black students like Thurman painfully forced themselves into the white intellectual boxes their white instructors and contemporaries occupied comfortably.

Thurman's engagement with topics based in the European theological tradition exhibit at once his budding brilliance and his willingness to remain open to new ideas independent of the keen racial interest he could not deny. Thurman's academic pursuits at Rochester also display his determination to make the best out of a bad racial situation by gleaning all that he could from professors and mentors even if he did not agree with their racial politics, a tactic he used throughout his career.

Katie Kelly Thurman

One week after Thurman's graduation from Rochester Seminary, he married Katie Laura Kelly in LaGrange, Georgia. Katie Kelly, a 1918 alum of Spelman, was two years Thurman's senior. Katie was the eldest child of Charles H. Kelly, a Morehouse alumnus and an outstanding educator, and Frances Kelly, a graduate of Spelman College. Little information is left to be found about Katie Kelly Thurman apart from her untimely death at 33 years of age and after four years

[60] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Woman's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 195.

of marriage. Thurman mentioned Katie only four times in his autobiography, briefly telling of their dating, marriage, her sickness, and death.

From the information available, Katie had established herself professionally and demonstrated intellectual potential before she met Thurman. After a short teaching stint in Birmingham, Alabama, Katie enrolled in divinity school at the University of Chicago in 1920.[61] For unknown reasons, Katie left the divinity school and returned to Atlanta where she took up employment as a visiting health educator with the black branch of the Anti-Tuberculosis Association. Katie's efforts in Atlanta sparked her interest in social work, and she subsequently enrolled in the New York School of Social Work, which later changed its name to the Columbia University School of Social Work. While in New York, Katie worked in the Anti-Tuberculosis center at the Municipal Health Department in Morristown, New Jersey, a short distance from New York City. Most likely this was where she contracted the tuberculosis that claimed her life tragically only a few years later.

Though Thurman does not say how his relationship with Katie grew, it is safe to assume that Thurman met Katie through her brother and his class mate, Charles Kelley, Jr. As Walter Fluker has pointed out, Thurman's frequent trips to New York City as a seminarian were probably made so that he could spend time with Katie.[62] Thurman mentioned going to see *Hamlet, Othello, Merchant of Venice,* and *Swan Lake* with her in New York.[63] Seeing these shows with Katie was when he may first have fallen for the "the mysterious beauty of [her] eyes."[64] The young couples' wedding was an intimate affair with only immediate family

[61] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, lxiii.
[62] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, lxiii.
[63] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 54.
[64] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 65.

members and close friends of the bride and groom attending. Katie was frail, already having begun her fight with tuberculosis. After a family breakfast following the ceremony, the new couple went on their honeymoon, a train ride to Oberlin, Ohio, where the newly-wedded Thurman had accepted the call to serve as pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church.

Chapter 4: Oberlin, Haverford, Rufus Jones, and a Pragmatic Mysticism

In the fall of 1928, Howard Thurman attended a religious education convention held at a church near Oberlin, Ohio. No detail of the convention seemed as important to Thurman as his exit. Leaving the convention early, Thurman stumbled upon a book table with a sign reading, "Your choice 10¢." Before leaving the convention Thurman purchased two books. One book was by novelist and historian Willa Cather, *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and The History of Christian Science*. The other was by Quaker mystic and Haverford professor of philosophy and psychology Rufus Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life*. Between the two volumes, Jones's book attracted Thurman more. *Finding the Trail of Life* was an extended version of Jones's 1902 autobiographical work, *A Boy's Religion from Memory*, a book beloved by philosopher William James. Years later Thurman recalled, "I was intrigued by the title and sat on the steps of the church and began reading. I did not move until I had read the entire book."[1]

In his autobiography, Jones gave an elaborate picture of his childhood religious experiences at Quaker meetings, Sunday school, home, and in nature. Within Jones's reflection on his experience in nature, he spoke of his direct contact with God:

> I had no satisfactory theory to explain the presence and the work of God in nature. I find it hard to discover a satisfactory theory even now. But, at any rate, my love of beauty in nature helped very much to strengthen and support my faith in God. I *felt* His presence in my world rather than thought out how He could be there. When I was moved with wonder, awe and mystery, I was always reaching out beyond what I saw and touched, and I had a religious feeling even if I did not have a sound theory to go with it.[2]

[1]Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: An Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1979), 74.
[2] Rufus Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), 57.

In the book, Jones described his other mystical experiences and defined what he understood mystical experience to be: "a personal conviction by an individual that the human spirit and the divine Spirit have met, have found each other, and are in mutual and reciprocal correspondence as spirit with Spirit."[3]

Jones's articulation of what James called the "ineffable" in mystical experiences was probably part of what drew Thurman to Jones. Jones's account of his mystical experiences perhaps affirmed Thurman's experiences as a youth praying under his special oak tree and walking on the beach. Moreover, Thurman was probably attracted to Jones's account of such religious experience because he presented it with an intellectual gravitas. After reading Jones's book, Thurman resolved that "if this man were alive, I wanted to study with him."[4] Fortunately, Thurman was able to correspond through a Quaker friend who was Jones's former neighbor, and arranged for six months of study under Jones's direction at Haverford. Thurman secured funding from the National Council on Religion and Higher Education and found free graduate student housing at Haverford to make the study possible.[5]

Thurman's time with Jones, from the winter of 1929 until the summer of that year, became a pivotal moment in his intellectual formation. "Haverford was a crucial experience," he wrote,

> . . . a watershed from which flowed much of the thought and endeavor to which I was to commit the rest of my working life.

[3] Rufus Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life in the Middle Years* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1934), 193.
[4] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 74.
[5] The National Council on Religion in Higher Education, now known as the Society for Values in Education, during Thurman's Haverford studies was an interfaith organization hoping to improve the teaching of religion and expand the national conversation about religion. The fellowship Thurman received was usually given to students in doctoral programs in religion.

> These months defined my deepest religious urges and framed in meaning [*sic*] much of what I had learned over the years.[6]

Jones influenced Thurman to move beyond his social-gospel-centered ethics and place his mystical experience at the heart of his ethics. Thurman's mysticism and the ethics which flowered from it were more than an imitation of his professor's thoughts. Thurman went on to articulate his own mysticism in a way that aided him to minister amid tragedy.

Oberlin, Mt. Zion, and the Haverford Move

The circumstances surrounding Thurman's move to Haverford are far more complex than the account he gave readers in his autobiography. Attending Haverford meant uprooting his young family and leaving his pastorate at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Oberlin, Ohio. The Haverford move left Thurman's small family split. Thurman's sister Madaline, who lived with the family, remained in Oberlin staying in the school's dormitories. Upon doctor's recommendation Thurman sent his tuberculosis-stricken wife Katie Kelly Thurman and his young daughter Olive Katherine Thurman to Georgia to live with her family hoping that the milder weather would help her fight the disease. This change of climate only gave Katie momentary relief; she died a year and a half after Thurman's Haverford studies. Olive never forgave her father for sending them away. She felt that her father had placed his spiritual and academic curiosities over his parental commitments.

Thurman's studies with Jones also came at a professional price, costing him the possibility of more lucrative and prestigious appointments. By this time, Thurman had been out of seminary for three years and his career had begun gaining momentum. He was already a well sought after minister and speaker on the college circuit. In 1928, Thurman had stood behind

[6] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 77.

lecterns at Vassar College, Spelman College, Ohio State University, and the University of Illinois at Champaign as well as a host of black and white churches. He had headlined the Minister's Conference at Hampton Institute, a leading conference for black seminary-trained preachers. He turned down chaplaincies offered to him by the Tuskegee Institute, Morehouse College, Spelman College, and Howard University as well as the pastorate of First Baptist Church in Charleston, West Virginia, the former church of his mentor Mordechai Johnson.

Thurman's Haverford period partly arose from his unresolved ambivalence over whether to pursue a Ph.D. In his Rochester years, Thurman seriously considered dedicating himself solely to the life of the mind. Upon accepting his pastorate at Mt. Zion Baptist in January, 1926, Thurman reached out to the dean of Oberlin Divinity School, Thomas W. Graham, about further theological studies. Thurman's interest in attending Oberlin was most likely a way for him to test his desire to earn a doctorate; but as he wrote in his letter to Graham, "the matter of the degree [was] secondary" to his intellectual growth.[7] Thurman's letter details a desire for an informal independent study, but Oberlin's records show that he enrolled in the Master of Sacred Theology (STM) program.[8]

At Oberlin, Thurman focused on biblical studies with Old Testament scholar Kemper Fullerton and New Testament scholar Edward Bosworth. Thurman was no stranger to Bosworth's work. In 1918, Mordecai Johnson gifted Thurman with Bosworth's *About Jesus*, cultivating Thurman's exposure to the historical critical method of biblical interpretation.[9] Further prepared at Rochester by his close study of the historical critical method and the social

[7] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 70.
[8] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 70.
[9] From Mordecai Johnson to Howard Thurman, 8 July 1918, *Thurman Papers,* Vol. 1, 6.

gospel, Thurman's work at Oberlin focused on the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah (52:13-53:12).

In his pastorate of the mostly black Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Thurman creatively meshed his liberal theological training with the church's theology and worship. Under Thurman's leadership, Mt. Zion became a space that pushed the racial, religious, and cultural boundaries accepted by most American churches. Mt. Zion's communion practice enacted the open, welcoming environment that Thurman cultivated. Thurman told his parishioners that communion was for *all* who wished to become one with Christ. By doing this, Thurman attempted to break down the dogmatic and social divides that often excluded certain people from Christ's communion table; and instead he brought together the unbaptized and the baptized, black and white, impoverished and wealthy. At Mt. Zion, Edward Bosworth, a white professor, dialogued and worshipped with black congregants, some of whom were former slaves.[10] Thurman's liberalism extended to interfaith inclusivity. Mt. Zion was also a place where a Chinese Buddhist visitor was able to "close [his] eyes and listen with [his] spirit" and feel "[he] was in [his] Buddhist Temple," according to the visitor.[11] For Thurman, the Buddhist man's visit marked the beginning of Thurman's effort to unveil and live into a universal spirituality. Many years later, he recalled that "the [religious] barriers [were] . . . crumbling." "I was," he said, "breaking new ground. Yet it would be many years before I would fully understand the nature of the breakthrough."[12]

Haverford

[10] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 71.
[11] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 73.
[12] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 73.

Though Howard Thurman was deeply tied to his bold and transforming work at Mt. Zion, he sensed the need for further intellectual growth by working under Rufus Jones. Working with Jones likely nourished Thurman's budding pluralistic yearnings. Jones's mysticism presented Thurman with a more expansive center for his social ethics than the social gospel in which he had been steeped in at Rochester. While Thurman embraced the social gospel for its ability to call Christians to account for social evils, the more evangelical aspects of the social gospel did not provide Thurman common ground with those who were not Christians yet sought a more just society. Scripture alone could no longer suffice as the sole basis upon which Thurman now began to articulate his understanding of a uniting divine spirit within all people. Jones's writing exposed Thurman to an ethic where he "looked into the face of a [person] and saw [his own] face."[13] Thurman's semester with Jones proved critical to replacing the social gospel with mystical experience at his ethical center.

Ironically, this universal ethic espoused by Haverford's major intellectual figure was not upheld in practice by the small elite Quaker college where he taught. Thurman was the only black student enrolled at Haverford College in 1929. Haverford briefly racially integrated in 1923 when it admitted a Jamaican student, Osmond Pitter, who played on the school's cricket roster.[14] Not until 1947 did Haverford make a major integration effort when it hired black sociologist Ira Reid and admitted two black students Paul Moses and Nwanneka Adimore. At Haverford, as at Rochester, Thurman gained all he could despite a bad racial situation. Even in

[13] Howard Thurman and Ronald Eyre, *Howard Thurman Interviewed on BBC Classics* (London: BBC, Videocassette, 1978).

[14]Loren Ghiglione, "Diversity: A Blind Spot in College History?" Traveling with Twain. Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, 14 Nov. 2011, http://www.travelingwithtwain.org/2011/11/14/philadelphia-pa/diversity-a-blind-spot-in-college-history/.

his work with Jones, Thurman yet again seemed to have to side-step the racial issues he found so important. Thurman reflected on the strange character of Jones's color-blind liberalism:

> During the entire time with Rufus [Jones], issues of racial conflict never arose, for the fact of racial differences was never dealt with at the conscious level. The ethical emphasis in his interpretations of mystical religion dealt primarily with war and peace, the poverty and hunger of whole nations. . . . [T]he specific issues of race with which I had been confronted all my life as a black man in America seemed strangely irrelevant. I felt that somehow he transcended race; I did so, too, temporarily, and, in retrospect, this aspect of my time with him remains an enigma.[15]

Jones's blindness to racial exclusion and disparity in America was typical of most liberals in the early to mid-20th century. Jones and other religious liberals, such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Harry Emerson Fosdick (in his early years), and Reinhold Niebuhr (particularly in his later years), rarely addressed racism as a problem in America, if at all. Jones was more concerned about racial matters in the international arena rather than in the United States. In the mid-1920s, Jones was heavily involved in the Western attempt to mend Christianity's relationship with Asian and South Asian countries such as Japan, China, and India. Jones's journal reflection on his trip to China in 1926 sheds light on the kind of Christianity he wanted to see flourish in the Orient:

> [People throughout Asia] should find in [Christianity] what speaks to their life. They should be free to select what they can use and adapt and pass over what seems foreign and outdated. They want inspiration, illumination, suggestions [*sic*] spiritual fellowship and leadership—not dogma and infallibilities. There should emerge a unique type of Christianity for China, for Japan, for India, interpreted through their highest racial ideals and aspirations, absorbing into itself all that is truest and best, all that is most human and divine in their native religions, all that has been

[15] Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 77.

> contributed by their extraordinary spiritual leaders of the past ages.[16]

Jones hoped that any form of Christianity that existed in Asia would be tested by the doings and sufferings of the people of the Asian diaspora. For Jones, Asia needed "the genius of Japan, China and India as much as it needed and used the genius of the Hebrews or the Greeks or the Romans."[17]

Jones's concern about the need for cultural diversity within Christianity is a major point of irony. Jones found the conditions of people halfway around the globe to be more compelling than the sorrows of black Americans who flooded the city of Philadelphia only 20 minutes away from his Haverford home. Though Jones was not Thurman's comrade in the fight for racial equality in America, Jones could offer Thurman the intellectual tools needed to oppose racism morally. Much like his relationship with George Cross at Rochester, Thurman developed the philosophical and theological insights he learned from Jones for his own purposes.

Apart from Jones's obtuseness in relation to racial conflict in America, he represented the best of the liberal religious tradition in the early decades of the 20th century. By the time Thurman reached Haverford in 1929, Jones was a well-noted figure in American liberal religion. He had helped found and edit the leading Quaker journal, the *American Friend*, while still a graduate student at Haverford. In 1917, he co-founded the American Friends Service Committee, an organization that gave World War I conscientious objectors ways of performing non-violent national service. By the 1920s, because of his academic and popular books, Jones was one of the "two best stylists writing in America" next to William James, according to *The London Times*.[18]

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[16] Rufus Jones, *Rufus Jones Papers: Diaries 1875-1948*, Box 62, Magill Library, Quaker and Special Collections.
[17] Rufus Jones, *Rufus Jones Papers: Diaries 1875-1948*, Box 62.
[18] Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend of Life: The Biography of Rufus Jones* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1958), 108.

As historian Matthew Hedstrom has pointed out, Jones was a fountainhead for American "middlebrow mysticism" in the 1920s and 1930s.[19] Through Jones's activism, speaking, and writing, he became a guide for middlebrow Americans who sought religious faith beyond the biblical fundamentalism of many evangelicals. Jones offered a socially-engaged and democratic mysticism as an alternative to the dogmatic determinism of religious conservatives. He called Christians and spiritual seekers to a mysticism defined by their unique experiences of the divine and holy.

For Jones, seeking after God or a transcendent reality was not an exercise in spiritual escapism or a flight to the otherworldly. Rather, he found that mystics focused on a threefold task: to search for the divine within one's self, one's fellows, and one's environment. In his 1904 book *Social Law in the Spiritual World: Studies in Human and Divine Inter-Relationship*, Jones said that this search for the divine pointed a person toward the interconnectedness of God, individuals, and nature. He argued that one's "personal life is conjunct. . . . [and] if [one] cannot be a self alone, no more can God."[20] Furthermore, this interconnectedness created a "spark of spiritual life," hence creating a *social law* between the mystic and the world.[21]

Jones's mysticism, especially as articulated in *Social Law*, ought to be seen in relation to a pragmatist philosophical move on his part. More specifically, Jones's notion of a mystical path to social law is similar to William James's notions about religious experiences articulated in *The Varieties of the Religious Experience*. In *Varieties*, James posited that religious experiences could reorient one to saintly virtues, such as asceticism, purity, charity, and strength of soul. The

[19]Matthew Hedstrom, "Rufus Jones and Mysticism for the Masses," http://www.crosscurrents.org/Hedstrom0204.htm.
[20]Rufus Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World: Studies in Human and Divine Inter-Relationship* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), 17.
[21]Jones, *Social Law*, 17.

similarity between *Social Law* and *Varieties* was no coincidence. Jones was well acquainted with James and the broader pragmatist school.

Jones was a product of Harvard's philosophical golden age. As a master's student in philosophy in the 1900–1901 academic year, Jones studied under the philosophical giants Josiah Royce and George Santayana. Though James was on sabbatical from Harvard writing *Varieties* at the time, Jones became a lifelong James devotee. Quotations and reformulations of James's ideas permeate Jones's corpus of books, journal reflections, and lecture notes. Thurman was probably influenced by James and the pragmatist school in his studies under Jones.

Although Howard Thurman left scant details of his time with Jones, the short summary he gave in his autobiography speaks volumes. Jones had mapped out a course of study for Thurman, having him attend all of his lectures and his seminar on Meister Eckhart.[22] Thurman mentioned some of the assignments, especially "several papers [on mystics:] one on Spanish mystics, particularly Madem Guyon [*sic*], and another [*sic*], a definitive study of the mysticism of St. Francis of Assisi."[23] Thurman mainly highlighted what he learned about European philosophers under Jones, but evidence in Jones's papers points to his preference for American philosophers.[24] To this day, an imposing portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson adorns Jones's desk in his study housed in the Magill Library at Haverford. A worn and heavily marked abridged copy of James's dense two-volume *Principles of Psychology* is the only book that rests among Jones's faded class notes. These items suggest Jones's allegiance to American pragmatism, especially to James.

[22]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 76.
[23]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 76.
[24]Rufus Jones, *Rufus Jones Papers*, "Notes for Haverford Classes," Box #99.

More definitive evidence of this philosophical connection lies in Jones's syllabi and lecture notes; they provide a picture of the courses Thurman might have taken. Furthermore, these documents indicate the ideas that Jones wanted Thurman and his other students to engage. Jones drew up his syllabi and wrote lectures with his aims and ideals placed at the forefront. As Jones's biographer Elizabeth Vining explained, "[h]e gave his students what he considered good for them, he made it all crystal clear, he left them in no doubt what his own convictions were."[25] Given Jones's intentionality in creating syllabi and lecture notes, it is apparent that he wanted his students to study pragmatism.

In Jones's courses such as "History of Philosophy," "Psychology," and "Psychology of Religion," his pragmatist inclinations shines through. "History of Philosophy" was a survey course that introduced students to the canon of Western philosophy by covering Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Emerson. "Pragmatism" is the last topic included on the syllabus. The fact that Jones ended with Pragmatism, and not Personalism or Utilitarianism, tells of the lasting impact he wanted pragmatism to have on students. Indeed, Jones's decision to end the course with pragmatism—a philosophy unconcerned with transcendent ideals—was perhaps his attempt to push students toward philosophical ethics and away from idealist metaphysics.

Jones's two other courses "Psychology" and "Psychology of Religion" were largely based, if not solely based, on James's *Principles of Psychology*. James's *Principles of Psychology*, a massive 1,200-page book, was the only assigned text for the two courses. Jones

[25]Vining, *Friend of Life*, 241.

took students through James's presentation of neuroscience, human action, and the range of human emotions. As Jones noted, the course had a major effect on his students:

> I was soon impressed with the fact that Psychology tended to shake the student awake if he had not already found himself. It opened many new approaches to life. It gave fresh insights into the significance of what was going on within the man himself. He began to see what it meant to be "captain of his own soul."[26]

In *Principles,* James downplayed the metaphysical elements of psychology. The two-volume tome concentrates on the neurological and physiological aspects of the human brain and personality. However, scattered throughout *Principles* are moments when James considers the metaphysical aspects of psychology and psychological states. Chapters such as "Habit," "Consciousness of Self," "Attention," "Reasoning," and "Will" emphasize the metaphysical dimensions. The "Habit" and "Will" chapters probably took a major priority in Jones's course. In both of these chapters, James discusses the effects of human choices—the times when a person becomes captain of her or his own soul.

Directing his students, including Thurman, toward the pragmatist tradition speaks to Jones's larger project. Jones was mainly concerned with putting pragmatism in conversation with mysticism. He believed that earlier mystics' adherence to classical philosophy made them unable to engage the realities of the physical world. As Jones stated in a 1915 article published in the *Harvard Theological Review*, "Mysticism will not . . . become a powerful present-day force until it is liberated from its age-long alliance with classical philosophy and translated into the thought-terms of our time."[27]

[26] Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend of Life*, 241.
[27] Rufus Jones, "Mysticism in Present-Day Religion," *Harvard Theological Review,* Vol. VIII, No. 2, (April 1915), 155–65.

Sources do not reveal the benefit that auditing Jones's courses may have had on Thurman, nor do they identify which courses Thurman audited while at Haverford. His memories offer too little to determine definitively Jones's overall influence. However, the listing of courses that Thurman taught during the 1930s at Howard University bear striking similarities to Jones's. Four of the six courses Thurman later taught at Howard shared the same name or subject as those Jones taught. Thurman's course in the "History of Mysticism" and a seminar on Rufus Jones and Meister Eckhart indicate his commitment to mysticism as an academic study. Thurman's other courses, such as "Psychology of Religion" and "Introduction to the Study of Religion," likely followed the Jamesian lead in his syllabi as did Jones's.[28] Thurman's connection with pragmatism ought to contextualize Thurman as a torchbearer of Jones's efforts to link mysticism with the temporal world. In this effort, Thurman and Jones were not trailblazers; rather they were torchbearers of a larger pragmatic mystical tradition.

The Pragmatic Mystical Tradition

The pragmatic mystical tradition that Jones and Thurman pioneered is best defined as an amalgam of American pragmatism and mysticism which seeks to find the ethical good mysticism offers.[29] This form of mysticism which called adherents to grapple with the world around them gave a counter narrative to the mysticism that emerged in Europe under the influence of Platonist mystic Dionysus of Areopagite (often referred to as Pseudo Dionysus) who emerged in the fifth or sixth century. Dionysian mysticism was based on ineffability of the divine. Dionysian mystics,

[28]Walter Earl Fluker, ed. *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume 2: Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), xxx.

[29] A similar narrative to the Pragmatic Mystical Tradition can be found in Leigh Schmidt's article, "Making of Modern Mysticism." Specifically, readers should note Schmidt's engagement with Rufus Jones's mysticism. Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Jun., 2003), pp. 273-302

according to Jones, looked to "'[lay] aside all mental energies . . ." and yearned for "union [with God] above thought, above states of consciousness, [and] above knowledge."[30] In contrast, the pragmatic mystical tradition disrupted the Platonic vision of Dionysus-inspired mystics by highlighting the fruits mystical experiences brought to bear in human life.

The pragmatic mystical tradition is best exemplified by thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and William James. The first and second generation of these thinkers served either one of two purposes: 1) to articulate ethical provocations informed by their mystical experiences; or 2) to define the fruits of mystical experiences. As third- and fourth-generation inheritors in this intellectual vein, Jones and Thurman each formulated an amalgam of both purposes.

The pragmatic mystical tradition in America began on the 20th of May, 1838, at a Transcendentalists meeting centering on the topic of mysticism. These Transcendentalist thinkers largely consisted of Unitarians, Unitarian defectors, and other intellectuals—among them Theodore Parker, Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and George Ripley.[31] They attempted to define mysticism and mystical historical figures. The meeting did not lead to a common definition or a definitive cannon of mystical writers. What did emerge out of the meeting were works by Transcendentalists that unveiled their mystical leanings. These mystically-inclined works include but are not limited to Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Oversoul" (1841), Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1851), and Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" (1855). In each of these works, in part or in entirety, the Transcendentalists express a mysticism that sought to unite all of humanity. Emerson states, "every [person's] particular being is contained and made one with all

[30]Rufus Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: MacMillan Co. of Canada, 1919), 109.
[31]Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Jun 2003, Vol. 71, Issue 2, 284.

other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission. . . ."[32]

The second generation of the pragmatic mystical tradition is represented by philosophers of the mid-to-late 19th century. Pragmatists such as James, Royce, and Charles Sanders Pierce attempted to concretize and categorize mysticism. While this generation did not claim to have mystical experiences, they found value in mysticism and religious experiences in general. James's Bostonian rearing put him deep within the ranks of American mystical philosophers. His father, Henry James, held a Swedenborgian mystical religious posture. Emerson was also a frequent house guest of the James household. Although this peculiar rearing never granted James a personal mystical experience, he did have a profound reverence for religious experience. James's inability to testify to personal religious experience left him a spiritual voyeur, categorizing, describing, and defending religious life and belief.

James's major opinions and observation in regard to religion are best represented in *The Will to Believe* (1896) and *The Varieties of the Religious Experience* (1902). *The Will to Believe*, which many have noted should have been titled "The Right to Believe," is a collection of essays that defends one's holding religious beliefs. In *Varieties*, James's Gifford Lectures, James tests religion "by the value of [its] fruits" through a detailed and cataloged description of the religious experience—in effect further validated the right to believe. James found that the fruits of religious experience could reorient religious individuals toward saintly virtues. Mysticism sat at the core of this ethical reorientation through religious experience.

[32]Editor Peter Knox, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Complete Collection of Works with Analysis and Historical Background* (New York: Annotated Classics, Amazon Digital Services, 2014), 4977.

For James, mysticism was fleeting and elusive by nature. Early in the lecture on mysticism in *Varieties,* James defines these experiences by their ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.[33] Though a concrete definition of mysticism appeared to elude James, later in the lecture he pointed to a tactile gift that mysticism offers:

> In mystic states we both become one with the absolute and we are aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by clime or creed . . . [In all religions] we find the same recurring note, so that there is mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which brings it about that mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land. Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates language, and they do not grow old.[34]

Highlighting this socially transcendent aspect of mysticism indicates James's reverence for this element of the religious experience. With Emerson, James found that the center of any good religion must stress the divine within all humanity.

The pragmatic mystical tradition later became something different in the hands of Jones. Jones took several cues from James as he viewed, defined, cataloged, and historicized the religious experience. Yet, unlike James, Jones was not merely a spiritual voyeur. Jones did not speculate about the possibilities of religiosity. Jones was not just a theorist of religious flames; he was part of a religious fire. As a practicing Quaker mystic, Jones spoke and wrote voice to his own mystical experience. Moreover, Jones used pragmatism to orient his mysticism toward the needs of the temporal world. For Jones, those who sought the mystical must "seek it in a life of love and sacrifice."[35] Furthermore, Jones's mysticism took on language similar to the social

[33] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Group, 1982), 159.
[34]James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 177.
[35] Rufus Jones, *Social Law*, 135.

gospel. As Jones states late in *Social Law*, "[The mystic] on earth is to be a fellow-worker with God—contributing in a normal daily life his human powers to the divine Spirit who works in him and about him, bringing to reality a kingdom of God."[36] Jones called these kinds of socially engaged mystics "affirmation mystics."

In being more concerned about the earthly ends of his mysticism, Jones took on a pragmatic philosophical posture. Unlike many earlier European mystical philosophers who were heavily influenced by classical philosophy, Jones rejected the Platonist impulse that desired a reality "beyond consciousness."[37] Jones called people who embraced this kind of mysticism "negation mystics." Jones described a negation as someone who proceeds:

> by process of negation. Everything finite must be transcended. He must slough off not only the rags of his own righteousness, but the last vestige of his finitude. Union with God, absorption in His Being, so that "self" and "other" are unknown is the goal of his search.[38]

Overall, *Social Law* was Jones's grand attempt to pull mysticism away from this search for otherworldliness and attempted to reconcile his faith with psychology. Rather than looking for a mystical experience "beyond consciousness," Jones calls one to use consciousness as measuring stick for faith's utility. Within the "Introduction" of *Psychology,* Jones states,

> There is no religious view or practice so sacred that it does not sooner or later find itself summoned into the sanctum of the psychologist, where it is calmly asked by what right it continues to survive and hold a place in the lives of mankind. . . . So with every other article of faith or hope. [*sic*] Some insister questioner is sure to ask, Does it square with the facts of consciousness?[39]

[36] Rufus Jones, *Social Law*, 136.
[37] Rufus Jones, *Social Law*, 131.
[38] Rufus Jones, *Social Law*, 133.
[39] Rufus Jones, *Social Law*, 12.

For Jones to "square" religion to the "facts of consciousness"—in fact using the language of James—meant for one to measure their faith against "the first foremost concrete fact which everyone will agree to belong to his [or her] inner experience."[40] Once faith was gauged against the test of consciousness, then a person would be able to see how it orients him or her toward their fellow human beings.

Furthermore, Jones's call for faith to meet the demands of consciousness, instead of the otherworldly concerns of many mystics, was in line with the pragmatic tradition. Jones's turn toward consciousness forced mysticism to answer the practical ends that James put at the forefront of the pragmatic method. In James's second essay in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* entitled "What Pragmatism Means," he describes the pragmatic method as a means to determine the practicality of metaphysical ideas. James's pragmatic method sought to find the realistic value of these ideas. James's description of the pragmatic method is worth quoting at length:

> The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many?—fated or free?—material or spiritual?—here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side of the other's being right.[41]

[40]William James, *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (Toronto: Harper Torchbook Edition, 2001), 18.
[41]William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), 45-56.

Jones's use of mysticism to grapple with the realities of consciousness pulled mysticism in the direction of James's pragmatic method. Here, mysticism had to prove its worth within the realities in which mystics faced. Consequently, Thurman had to find the cash value of mysticism in accordance with the circumstances he faced as a black man in America.

Thurman, Pragmatic Mysticism, and Rufus Jones

Howard Thurman embraced Jones's pragmatic mysticism. However, Thurman did not give his fully articulated thoughts about mysticism until a decade after his Haverford studies. Archival evidence discloses little discussion of the subject in Thurman's early papers. The only close public engagement Thurman offered was in a 1934 review of Mary Anita Ewer's *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism* in the *Journal of Religion*. Thurman, charitable in the review, merely recommended the book "as a very useful guide in the interpretation of symbols employed by religious experience."[42]

Thurman's first full discussion of the subject was in his 1939 lecture series "Mysticism and Social Change" given at Eden Theological Seminary near St. Louis. The four-part lecture was Thurman's effort to define mysticism as well as its ethical and social implications. Similar to Jones, early in the lectures Thurman defined mysticism as "a primary contractual experience of God. It is first hand."[43] Thurman later noted that mystical experiences oriented a person toward the dealings of the finite world not only the external. Citing Jones, Thurman stated:

> Rufus Jones uses the term, *affirmation mystics*, to apply to those who are concerned with working out in a social frame of reference the realism of their mystic experience. He says that the mystic is always more than any finite task declares, and "yet he accepts this task because he has discovered that only through the finite the

[42] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 203.
[43] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 194.

> Infinite [is] to be found." Now the mystic is compelled to deal with social relations . . . in his effort to achieve the good, he finds that he must be responsive to human needs by which his life is surrounded.[44]

Thurman's mysticism seems to have been deeply influenced by the pragmatically enthused mysticism passed down to him by Jones. However, unlike Jones, Thurman used his mysticism to engage the dark and tragic spaces of society.

Jones's academic work and syllabi fit the category James once called "the healthy-minded." James noted the healthy-minded individual has little if any sense of evil: "from whatever cause, evil simply cannot then and there be believed in. [such a person] must ignore it; and to the bystander he may then seem perversely to shut his eyes to it and hush it up."[45] Throughout most of Jones's works, especially *Social Law*, he missed the fact that tragedy and evil exist and can impede a person's efforts to do good. In addition, within Jones's Philosophy syllabi, philosophers who deal explicitly with tragedy, such as Arthur Schopenhauer or Friedrich Nietzsche, are strangely absent. Jones could easily be cast as one of the "Religious Idealists" Reinhold Niebuhr critiqued as overly optimistic in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

Curiously, Jones was conscious of and took issue with overly optimistic accounts of mysticism. In his 1909 book *Studies in Mystical Religion*, he lamented mystics who:

> Exhibit an over fascination for suspension of all desire and a loss of the strain and struggle, which go with that "slow, dead heave of the will" in the great moral issues of life. They have, too, sometimes been almost obsessed with the fixed idea that all the ills of life and confusions of mutability would disappear if only they believed implicitly enough in the allness of God and the unity of all that is.[46]

[44] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 213.
[45] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 88.
[46] Rufus Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1919), xxxvi.

Yet, Jones's mysticism—as represented in his major works: *Social Law, The Inner Life* (1916), and even his Gifford Lectures *A Faith that Enquires* (1922)—only highlights the ethical implications of mysticism's unifying character. In doing this, Jones's mysticism has a blind spot or, at the very least, a distorted view of the tragic. The few times that Jones did grapple with tragedy, it seemed to come from a place of privilege. In Jones's only discussion about tragedy in *Social Law*, he said, "One reason why life is so full of tragedy is that we know so little what we really want and that we never quite see all that any choice of our own involves."[47] This kind of account leaves out the death and despair that often mark tragic human experiences, which are often outside of a person's control. Jones's response to tragedy, or lack thereof, is particularly strange because his life had plenty of tragedy. By his 40s, Jones had buried his wife, his fiancée, and son—all of them dying prematurely. In the 1930s, Jones also came face to face with the German Gestapo in the failed hope of freeing Jews from Nazi oppression. These various tragic experiences Jones had faced in his personal life appear to have been omitted in his prescriptions for religion in his academic works that followed: *The Flowering of Mysticism* (1939), *The Radiant Life* (1944), and *A Call to what is Vital* (1948).

Howard Thurman offered an alternative mysticism, building on Jones's work but addressing the darker aspects of human life that Jones did not. In "Mysticism and Social Change," Thurman addressed evil and sin with an air of Niebuhrian realism. Alluding to the Jonesian distinction between affirmation and negation mystics, Thurman called on the mystic to:

> attempt . . . some form of moral appeal to his fellows that will make them acutely aware of the nature of sin and to bring them to judgment. If he is dealing with a person who shares with him in some collective manner a conscious sense of the ultimate meaning of human life, his basis of appeal is comparatively simple. . . . In

[47] Rufus Jones, *Social Law*, 211.

> the absence of such unanimity on the part of the controllers of society his problem is to bring such persons to a mount of vision in which they themselves stand in immediate candidacy to be laid hold on by God. Activity of this sort is apt to be futile for reasons that are obvious. Therefore, the affirmation mystic has to deal with them in the areas of their activities. Preaching to such persons, in my opinion, is apt to be a waste of effort and is a blind alley. Some method must be achieved by which the sufferers in the situation can act so as to shock the oppressor into a state of upheaval and insecurity.[48]

Following Reinhold Niebuhr in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Thurman doubted that simply preaching the Gospel, or a unifying mysticism, could cause real social change. Contrary to Jones, Thurman found that affirmation mystics needed to take into account tragedy, evil, and sin as they attempt to build "the Kingdom of God."

Throughout Thurman's career, he continued to engage the darker reaches of life in academic books. Dissimilar to Jones, Thurman's works took seriously the harsh racial realities within the American democratic experiment. In books such as *Jesus and the Disinherited*, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, and *Luminous Darkness*, Thurman illustrated the tragic side of American life while holding out mystical experiences as a distinct possibility. In doing this, Thurman brought into plain view a catastrophic reality that Jones was either incognizant of or chose to ignore.

[48]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 218.

Conclusion

Thurman and Jones never grew to become close friends. No archive holds the two men's phone records and written correspondence between them is scant. Only one letter exists between the two. In the letter, Thurman thanked Jones for the semester-long study and acknowledged receipt of a paper on St. Francis. In Thurman's short reflection on his time with Jones, Thurman presented Jones as a person unconcerned with the struggles besetting daily life. While Thurman recalled Jones as a prolific writer, an inspiring teacher, and an engaging preacher with the gift of intimacy, he thought that Jones did not have a high degree of self-consciousness of himself in relation to others that could make him seem remote. Thurman remembered a moment illustrating Jones's semi-detachment:

> One day he told me that it had been his lifelong habit to take a nap after lunch. I smiled, the reaction of youth to what seemed to me to be a waste of time. He responded by saying, ever so gently, "The time will come when you may wish you had been wise enough to have developed this habit while you were young." Toward the end of my stay at Haverford he stopped me on campus to say that he had actually forgotten to meet his class. With a tone of muted sadness he said, "Now I know that it is time for me to retire."[49]

Thurman's above reflection seems to indicate that he viewed Jones as a bit out of touch. Intellectually, Thurman found that Jones "gave [him] confidence in the insight that the religion of the inner life could deal with empirical experience without retreating from the demands of such experience."[50] On an interpersonal level, however, Jones did not consider Thurman as much of a peer in inquiry as his mentor did. Jones's blind spot for racial injustice probably played a role in their mutually distant relationship. Nevertheless, throughout Thurman's career, he drew

[49]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 76.
[50]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 76

from what he had learned from Jones about mysticism as he molded it to become one of many resources in the struggle against social injustices.

During Thurman's Howard University years, his race politics remained in the fore of his intellectual life. As we will later see, his mysticism and social gospel biblical hermeneutic became something different in his hands than it was in his professors. Thurman's use of the tools of liberal religion assorted with his race politics also set him apart from many of his Howard University colleagues. Moreover, Thurman's racial politics and liberal religious commitments also set him apart from liberal religious colleagues such as those at the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Chapter 5: The Beginning of a Career: Thurman at Spelman and Howard

After Thurman's six-month sojourn at Haverford, he moved to Atlanta took up a joint appointment at Spelman and Morehouse teaching religion and philosophy. He also held a chaplaincy position at Spelman—the first of three college chaplaincies in his career, the other two to come at Howard and Boston Universities, respectively. Thurman's work as a college chaplain placed him in the dual role of professor and minister. Serving as professor and pastor, he created a rare and almost seamless connection between the practice and study of religion. Thurman at this point began to forage his unique color-concerned religious liberalism, engaging both racial oppression and complex spirituality. In his classes at Spelman and Morehouse, he structured his religious liberalism to meet his needs and the needs of his students as they contended with the realities of black life. Later as a dean of Howard's Rankin Chapel, he carved out a space for rethinking and creatively expressing black spirituality by using black iconography, engagement with non-Christian religious books, and inviting liberal religious speakers. Thus, Thurman cultivated a space where students, administrators, faculty, and community visitors could intentionally expand their conceptions of black religiosity. Furthermore, at Howard, he challenged his faculty peers to give greater weight to the role of race in their analysis of American life.

Spelman and Morehouse and Thurman's Christology

Thurman's tenure at Spelman and Morehouse amounted to a mixed period of academic and ministerial contentment, professional dissonance, and personal tragedy. He reimagined his scholarly approaches as he taught black college students and faced harsh relations with Spelman's white president who harbored a hidden bigotry toward black people. Katie Kelly Thurman's ailing health, and later death, created an overwhelmingly dark period of struggle and

depression in Thurman's life. These developments—filled with success and tragedy—combined into one of the most formative periods of his life.

At Spelman and Morehouse, Thurman cut his teeth as a professor. Thurman's later reflections give the impression that he learned more from his students than they did from him.[1] The students stretched Thurman intellectually as a minister and scholar. In his classroom, he created opportunities for open thought and deep reflection. In one course at Morehouse, rather than use a textbook, he and the students explored a single concept for each class, among them the finite versus the infinite, the timeless versus the temporal, and the universal versus particular.[2] Often Thurman found himself in dialogue with a single student for an entire class period, demonstrating to the other students the processes of working through an idea. Saturday nights meant group discussions at the Thurmans' residence. Thurman recalled that during these Saturday night chats, "No subject was forbidden, and the discussions ran the entire gamut of our interests and concerns, although they were inevitably related to our survival in a society that seemed to have no room for our young dreams and longings."[3]

Acting as Professor of Religion and Philosophy at both institutions as well as a chaplain at Spelman, Thurman found new footing for his scholarship. He developed an academic approach to meet the needs and experiences of his students in the Jim Crow South. Nothing had a greater impact in changing his view of the life of Jesus. The shift took place in a course he taught at Spelman entitled "The Bible as Living Literature" and centered on the life of Jesus as presented

[1]Landrom Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2" (San Francisco: The Howard Educational Trust, Video Cassette, 1978).
[2] Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[3] Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: the Autobiography of Howard* Thurman (New York: Mariner Books, 1981), 81.

in the Gospels.[4] Thurman and his students joined together in "a personal quest for a sense of . . . [self-worth], using the life of Jesus as [an] example."[5] Here, Thurman and the young women of Spelman found parallels between Jesus's life as a Jew under Roman rule and their own circumstances in the Jim Crow South, which led them to find in the historical Jesus a guide for the oppressed. Previously, Thurman's writings and sermons had addressed how white Christians ought to contend with the racial disparities which they had created and in which they participated. Thurman's experience in the Spelman course pushed him to utter his earliest articulations about the life of Jesus which later found expression in many of his early speeches, lectures, and articles. Together, these public statements sounded the prelude to Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited.*

The first time Thurman presented the life of Jesus in such a way was in "The Kind of Religion the Negro Needs in Times Like These," an article in the *Urban League Weekly Bulletin*, February, 1932.[6] He implicitly drew the parallel between the minority status of blacks in America, especially in the Jim Crow South, and the historical Jesus' marginalized status as a poor Jew living under Roman colonial rule in first-century Palestine. "[T]he fact [is]," he wrote, "that the religion espoused by [Jesus], the 'lowly Nazarene [,]' got much of its basic significance from underprivileged people from the fact that its exponent was a member of a despised minority group."[7] Three years later, this same line of thought appeared as "Good News for the Under Privileged" in Thurman's lecture at the annual convocation on preaching at Boston University. By his own admission, Thurman deliberately steered clear of the philosophical and theological

[4] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 78.
[5] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 78.
[6]Howard Thurman, "The Kind of Religion the Negro Needs in Times Like These," *The Atlanta Constitution* (Feb 28, 1932), 7C.
[7] Thurman, "The Kind of Religion the Negro Needs in Times Like These," 7C.

abstractions scholars and divines had attributed to Jesus.[8] By setting aside dogma as his starting point, Thurman stayed true to his training in the historical critical method of biblical study.

Thurman's historical critical approach held steady throughout his career. In a 1937 four-part lecture series, "The Significance of Jesus," given in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, Canada, for the Student Christian Movement of Canada, Thurman repudiated "the tendency to make Jesus and God identical" that in effect diminished Jesus' humanity.[9] A historical view of Jesus' life led Thurman to perceive social salvation in the Gospel—good news that addressed the manifestation of sin as poverty, racism, inequality, and oppression. By peeling away the cultural and theological baggage of 2,000 years, Thurman highlighted the circumstances that Jesus faced as a poor Palestinian Jew. From this vantage point, Thurman observed that Jesus was not a Roman citizen and did not enjoy the full privileges and protection of the Roman state: "Jesus was not a free Jew. If a Roman soldier kicked Jesus into a Galilean ravine, it was merely a Jew in the ravine. He could not appeal to Caesar."[10] Thus, Thurman held that Jesus' religion was shaped by his experience as a Jew under Roman occupation.

Thurman described the world that shaped Jesus in order to make a key point about Jesus' religion being simultaneously particular and expansive. He found that "Christianity in its social genesis, seems . . . to have been a technique of survival for a disinherited minority."[11] Here, Jesus called the disinherited to view themselves first as "child[ren] of God," regardless of social or economic status.[12] For Thurman, holding one's self as a child of God created new self-esteem within the disinherited and "an inner-togetherness, carrying within it the moral obligation to keep

[8] "Good News for the Underprivileged," *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 264.
[9] "The Significance of Jesus," *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 73.
[10] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 265.
[11] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 265.
[12] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 265.

itself intact." Thurman's notion of keeping one's inner self-esteem intact probably referred also to blacks' unwillingness to accept second class status or unequal treatment from the state because acquiescence to inequality meant to deny one's self-worth.

After living into one's divine birthright, Thurman argued, a person can begin to hold "[an] understanding which is based upon the inherent worth of the other" that is in every individual.[13] Thurman called for a widening of "the foundations of life so that one's concept of self increasingly includes a larger number of other individuals of life."[14] Thurman's notion of the oneness of all humanity—that the life of Jesus calls people toward—sounded strikingly like the pragmatic mysticism he had learned and appropriated from Rufus Jones at Haverford. More specifically, Thurman steered the disinherited toward what William James placed at the center of mysticism: the idea that there is "unity of man with God."[15] Ultimately, Thurman believed that Jesus' message leads people to understand and live out the statement that "Thou hast seen thy brother, thou hast seen thy God."[16]

Thurman was unusual in the 1930s for calling attention to the historical Jesus. Prominent theologians of the time such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr rarely, if ever, discussed the historical Jesus. The historical Jesus was mainly the object of theological consideration for the previous generation of theologians and social gospel activists. Albert Schweitzer, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Richard T. Ely—Rauschenbusch in particular, with his use of the historical critical approach to the Bible—directed the social gospel toward the issue of class struggles in the early 20th century.

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[13] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 269.
[14] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 265.
[15] William James, *Varieties of the Religious Experience* (New York: Public Domain Books, 1903), 177.
[16] Landrom Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

In the hands of white activists and scholars such as Rauschenbusch, the social gospel became a theology of white middle class ideals, galvanizing organizations such as the YMCA, home mission societies, and the Student Volunteer Movement. The social gospel mainly focused on ending poverty, alcoholism, and economic inequality chiefly among white laborers and white industrialists. As the social gospel had been articulated, it was incapable of contending with the problems damaging black communities in America—namely white supremacy.[17] Black "Social Gospelers" such as Francis Grimké, Reverdy Ransom, Mordecai Johnson, and other progressive black ministers of the early 20th century steered the social gospel to engage the struggles of black lives.

Each of these black ministers used the tools of the social gospel to promote the cause of racial equality. These ministers generally substantiated their demands for racial justice based on older, more conservative approaches to the Bible which did not engage historical studies or analysis.[18] Thurman was the first black minister to articulate how the message of the historical Jesus could be utilized by racial minorities. By focusing on racial oppression rather than social or economic status, Thurman argued more radically in "Good News for the Underprivileged" that solutions for any oppressed group had to be products of their own religious and political genius. For Thurman, "[o]nly the underprivileged man may bring the message to the underprivileged. No other can without the penalty of the Pharisee."[19] Consequently the "savior" was also an underprivileged, oppressed, Palestinian, peasant Jew.[20]

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[17]Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885–1912* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

[18]Though Mordecai Johnson certainly knew about the historical critical method and was a devotee of Walter Rauschenbusch, he never based his sermon's claims in that method.

[19] "The Message of the Spirituals," *Thurman Papers*, Vol.1, 265.

[20] Thurman's work on the historical Jesus opened the door for further presentations of Jesus in light of New Testament scholars of the later 20th century, such as John Dominic Crossan and Obery Hendricks.

In his Atlanta teaching years, Thurman was consumed with making sense of the religion of the oppressed. At Morehouse and Spelman, Thurman presented a five-day lecture series entitled "The Message of the Spirituals" (1928). Similar to his early work on Jesus that later became *Jesus and the Disinherited*, these lectures presented his germinating ideas that grew into his Ingersoll Lectures at Harvard in 1947 and were republished in 1975 as his famous *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. In this five-day lecture series, Howard Thurman sought to reintroduce the spirituals in a climate where "a generation [had] tended to be ashamed of the spirituals, or [they had] joined in the degrading and prostituting of the songs. . . ."[21] Spirituals such as "Jacob's Ladder," "My Soul is a Witness," "Heab'n, Heab'n," and "Deep River" became the objects of Thurman's theological and philosophical rumination.[22] Delving into the spirituals, Thurman brought to his students' awareness the tools they offered for inspiring the human spirit.

Thurman's lectures followed a legacy of black scholars—such as W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke—who tried to make sense of how the spirituals wrestled with the social and historical conditions of black life during chattel slavery. Thurman, however, was the first to discuss at length the theological underpinnings of the spirituals and how they expressed the existential challenges slaves endured. Here, Thurman highlighted how the spirituals were more than dark moments of lamentation or questioning God's justice. To the contrary, his exposition of the spirituals displayed black American slaves' capacity to hear the transformative biblical narratives in the midst of tragedy. Spirituals such as "Jacob's Ladder" spoke to a world of tragedy and uncertainty, conveying the message that "I am enslaved, I am

[21]Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1975), 3.
[22]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 126-138.

beaten and brutalized by power-maddened men, but I shall see to it that my experiences and my environment do not crush me. I'll send my spirit clear through it all and live. . . ."[23] Years later, Thurman mused that the spirituals were evidence of "the slaves [undertaking] the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned in [their] midst."[24]

Outside of his scholarship, teaching at Spelman proved to be a tumultuous time in Thurman's life. On a professional level, Thurman experienced inner turmoil over his relationship with Spelman's white president Florence Read. "[I] deeply resented the fact that, since its founding in 1881, Spelman had been presided over by white women presidents," Thurman recalled.[25] Read appeared to have a genuine interest in the education of black women; however, Thurman was concerned about the lack of black female role models on Spelman's campus. According to Thurman, there were no black women for Spelman women "to emulate or admire on their own terms."[26] To make matters worse, Read also attempted to micromanage Thurman, forcing him to check in whenever he left the college for personal business, even on his days off.[27]

The conflict Thurman encountered working under President Read became less of a priority for him in 1930. During Thurman's second year in Atlanta, his wife Katie's health took a turn for the worse. It became evident that Katie's tuberculosis was painfully leading to her imminent death. Thurman's letters to friends regarding Katie reveal that he was either in denial or at the least refused to publically acknowledge the severity of Katie's disease. Thurman's letters also give the impression that he never fully accepted her tragic condition. The only hit of

[23] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 129.
[24] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 129.
[25] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 79.
[26] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 79.
[27] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 80.

such an admission is in a 1930 letter to Thurman's mentor and Howard University president Mordecai Johnson: "Katie is scarcely better. The twilight gradually fades to darkness for we are not afraid."[28]

Thurman's lack of an emotional response to Katie's illness and eventual death may be a result of the document burning he is rumored to have done in his old age. The existence of some comforting letters from friends and colleagues gives the impression that he voiced his sorrow to a select few. Henry Pitney Van Dusen, a theological colleague and friend through the YMCA, hoped "with all [his] heart" that Katie's "improvement [would keep] up."[29] Mordecai Johnson wrote to "convey [his] love" to Thurman and his family, while praying that "the master may give [Thurman] all needed strength and vision and hope."[30] Sadly, these prayers and hopes for Katie met an unhappy end.

Katie Kelly Thurman died on the December 21, 1930, the first day of winter. Thurman's sister, Madaline, came from Oberlin to take care of his daughter Olive. After a long and arduous spring semester, Thurman sought out "the sea for solace and restoration."[31] Leaving Olive with his sister, he set sail for Europe, traveling to London, Edinburgh, Paris, and Geneva. The trip to Europe proved therapeutic. Thurman wrote, "My life seemed whole again and the strains of an unknown melody healed my inmost center. . . . I was ready for my journey."[32] Thurman returned from the Europe trip with renewed energy and hope for the road ahead.

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[28] *Mordecai Johnson Papers*, 21 July 1930, Box 12 Folder 15; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; hereafter *Mordecai Johnson Papers*
[29] From Henry Pitney Van Dusen to Howard Thurman, November 1, 1930, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 154.
[30] Mordecai Johnson to Thurman, Undated 1930, *Mordecai Johnson Papers*, Box 12 Folder 15; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
[31] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 82.
[32] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 83.

Indeed, Thurman arose from Katie's death invigorated, creating a new life for himself and Olive. In June of 1932, a year and a half after Katie's passing, Thurman married Sue Baily, a 1920 graduate of Spelman College's Preparatory program, a 1926 graduate of Oberlin College, and a traveling secretary for the YMCA. There is no paper trail that can help detail the budding relationship between Bailey and Thurman. However, an article that depicts the couple's wedding and Thurman's personal reflections bespeak a couple with an intensely intimate and romantic marriage. A 1932 article in the *Atlanta Daily* entitled "Thurman in Charge of Own Wedding Ceremony" tells of Thurman and Bailey's wedding which Thurman performed himself:

> Thurman began reading [a . . .] literary selection which began with Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," but consisted mostly of work[s] whose theme is "love" and finally concluded with a revised version of the thirteenth chapter of first Corinthians.[33]

Together, Bailey and Thurman stood with their backs to the audience and committed their lives to each other, unfazed by the drizzling rain. Perhaps influenced by Quaker practice, in lieu of traditional Protestant wedding vows, the couple had a moment of silence followed by their saying in unison, "I solemnly pledge my love to you forever and ever and ever."[34]

Sue Bailey Thurman was more than an object of Howard Thurman's romantic affections. She became his political and intellectual partner and interlocutor. In his memoirs, Thurman described the relationship in these terms:

> [S]he relates to me as a person, as a man, giving to me at my center a life of heart that made the whole world new. In the realm of ideas and dreams, she [is an] active "tennis player." We play the court,

[33] Juanita Paschal Toomer, "Thurman in Charge of Own Wedding Ceremony," *Atlanta Daily World*; June 15, 1932, 3.
[34] Juanita Paschal Toomer, "Thurman in Charge of Own Wedding Ceremony."

> bouncing the balls back and forth until there emerges a unanimity both of mind and of plan.[35]

Sue Bailey Thurman remained a major partner in her husband's life as they made decisions together about their ideas, lives, and respective work. Sue's role became more prominent when her husband moved to Howard University to become Dean of Rankin Chapel.

Howard University

For several years, Mordecai Johnson had attempted to recruit Thurman to become Howard University's dean of the chapel. Johnson had become Howard's first black president in 1926 and remained in close communication with Thurman as he began to climb the academic ranks. Johnson ensured Thurman an annual slot as a guest speaker on Howard's campus, probably a way of luring Thurman away from Atlanta. By 1932, bringing Thurman to Howard proved easy. Thurman already had a prickly relationship with Spelman's president, and Katie's death and his subsequent marriage to Sue likely made Thurman long even more for new surroundings. Furthermore, Thurman had a strong dislike for living in the South, especially the Deep South.

Thurman had originally returned to the South because of Katie's health. However, living in the South took its toll on his own health. Thurman had a severe sensitivity to racism, often to the point of becoming physically ill when he experienced racial prejudice or exclusion. The log of Thurman's speaking travel indicates his dislike for the Jim Crow South because it shows that he accepted invitations as often as possible from white liberals in the northern East Coast, Midwest, and West Coast. Thurman rarely preached in churches or spoke at HBCUs that were in the Deep South. When considering Thurman's avoidance of the Deep South for speaking

[35] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 84.

engagements, it must be remembered that travel involved a degree of hardship. Airplanes were not yet a feasible mode of travel. Train travel through the Deep South put Thurman in a Jim Crow car, and trains made frequent stops in small Southern towns where the potential for violence against a black man always existed. It is not difficult to imagine that travel by train in the South would have triggered Thurman's sensitivities and caused illness.

Howard's location in the relatively racially tame city of Washington, D.C., proved to be a desirable location for Thurman and many other black academics. Black scholars at the time were segregated into HBCUs which were located largely in Southern states with the exception of Wilberforce University in Ohio, Chaney College in Pennsylvania, and Lincoln University also in Pennsylvania. The Northern HBCUs, however, were in small towns which far from major metropolitan cities. Morgan State College, located in Baltimore, Maryland, barely south of the Mason-Dixon Line, was another possibility for black faculty; but Baltimore did not offer the political cover and opportunities found in the nation's capital. In some cases, working at Howard was the only chance many black faculty members had for doing the work of their passion in a major metropolitan city, while staying relatively removed from the threat of racist Southern violence.

Johnson used the university's location as a major bargaining chip in recruiting and keeping faculty members. Knowing that faculty members could not easily leave Howard, Johnson could administer it in a dictatorial fashion with little threat that his faculty would seek academic appointments elsewhere. Legendary historian and Howard faculty member Rayford Logan (1938–1965) spoke of Johnson's uncompromising style in a backhanded way: "A 'strong' administrator is more likely to become involved in controversies than a weak

administrator . . . President Johnson has not been accused of being weak."[36] Logan's landmark history of Howard's first 100 years demonstrated that the early years of Johnson's presidency were filled with tension between Johnson and members of the faculty and staff. The first decade and a half of Johnson's presidency involved in battles with Howard's Secretary of Treasury, Dean of the Medical School, and Vice-Dean of the Law School.[37] Though the minutes of Johnson's meetings with the board of trustees and faculty do not explain these administrators' controversies with Johnson, the fact that each of them resigned at Johnson's behest was indicative of his domineering way.

A more in-depth portrait of Johnson's authoritarian leadership style can be found in his relationships with Howard's faculty members. Johnson had the reputation for penny-pinching Howard's faculty budget, leaving little room for paid leave—irrespective of a professor's health, professorial development, or research—and retirement funding. Johnson also heavily micromanaged Howard's faculty, dictating the research of various faculty members. Even more senior Howard faculty members were victims of Johnson's dominance. Johnson told the eminent sociologist E. Franklin Frazier what sociology he was to write and economist Abram Harris what economics to examine[38] Confounding relations, Johnson had neither earned a doctoral degree nor developed an academic specialty.

Although Johnson did not have a Ph.D., he had reached a high level of theological education. He had received his A.B. at Brown University, his B.D. at Rochester Seminary, and was the valedictorian for his S.T.M. graduation from the Harvard Divinity School. Johnson was

[36] Rayford Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867–1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 249.
[37]Logan, *Howard University*, 256.
[38]Logan, *Howard University*, 248.

on par educationally with other liberal religious intellectuals of his era such as Rufus Jones and Reinhold Niebuhr who did not have doctorates. Unlike these contemporaries, however, he was more of an academic entrepreneur and may be said to have become the greatest black college president of any era.

Though the morality of Johnson's presidency is questionable, his achievements at the helm of Howard are not. Johnson became Howard's president amid dire circumstances. Howard's previous president J. Stanley Durkee had left the university on the brink of financial collapse. The renowned philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, Johnson's mentor, upon learning of Johnson's post inquired, "What on earth made you accept this position [at Howard University]? Don't you know that Howard University is one of the worst places for you to spend your life in the whole of the United States?"[39] Johnson's ability to maintain Howard's institutional integrity and bolster its prosperity, especially during the depression, was an amazing accomplishment.

When Johnson took the reins of Howard's presidency in 1926, the school had amassed a deficit of "$87,500 with [. . . an] annual deficit averaging $17,000.00 for the previous five years."[40] At the current rate of inflation, Howard's deficit values around $1.2 million and its annual deficit values at just under a quarter of a million dollars.[41] This debt was coupled with a $79,000 mortgage ($1 million today) on properties previously owned by the university.[42] Johnson's presidency was further financially hampered by meager federal appropriations and

[39]"Mordecai Johnson Autobiography," *Mordecai Johnson Papers*, Box 14 Folder 16; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 3.
[40]"Mordecai Johnson Autobiography," *Mordecai Johnson Papers,* Box 14 Folder 16; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 4.
[41] "CPI Inflation Calculator," http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl.
[42]"Mordecai Johnson Autobiography," *Mordecai Johnson Papers,* Box 14 Folder 16; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 4.
"CPI Inflation Calculator," http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl.

unsteady donations from alumni and philanthropists.[43] Due to this enormous financial burden, faculty members at Howard suffered significantly, leaving departments drastically understaffed and students underserved.[44]

Johnson raised $250,000 in his first year as president in order to match the $250,000 gifted by medical school alumni.[45] He was also able to persuade the federal government to increase considerably its appropriations for Howard. Federal appropriations grew from $218,000 in Johnson's first year to $1,760,000 in his fifth year.[46] Johnson used Howard's financial growth to expand the campus, constructing several new buildings in the course of his 30-year tenure. In the 1930s, the years of the Great Depression, Johnson went on to vastly improve and expand Howard's faculty, assembling the greatest concentration of black scholars in America's history.

Nine-tenths of all black Ph.D.s were represented on Howard's faculty.[47] Howard's faculty included scientific pioneers such as Charles Drew (medicine), Ernest E. Just (biology), Ruth Ella Moore (microbiology), and Percy Julian (chemistry). Howard also housed black humanities scholars who had their fingers on the pulse of black life in America, such as philosopher and first black Rhodes Scholar Alain Locke, religious scholar Benjamin E. Mays, and Washington, D.C. poet laureate Sterling Brown. Johnson also attracted young, left-leaning social scientists such as

[43]"Mordecai Johnson Autobiography," *Mordecai Johnson Papers,* Box 14 Folder 16; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 3.
"CPI Inflation Calculator," http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl.
[44] *Mordecai Johnson Papers,* Box 14 Folder 16; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, "Mordecai Johnson Autobiography," 5.
[45] *Mordecai Johnson Papers,* Box 14 Folder 16; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, "Mordecai Johnson Autobiography," 5.
[46] *Mordecai Johnson Papers,* Box 14 Folder 16; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, "Mordecai Johnson Autobiography," 5.
[47] Landrom Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

the economist Abram Harris, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, and political scientist Ralph Bunche.

Johnson sought out Thurman as a minister with academic gravitas who had gained his peers' respect in the pulpit as well as the classroom. At this point in Howard Thurman's career, he was well-known in both black and white religious circles. From 1931 through 1932 while still in Atlanta, Thurman had preached in the pulpits of several HBCU chapels including, but not limited to, Fisk University, Tuskegee University, and Bethune-Cookman College.[48] Thurman had gone on a month-long speaking tour of California and Arizona, giving addresses at various YMCA and YWCA venues, colleges, seminaries, and universities where he captivated audiences at such major institutions as Stanford, the University of California Berkeley (Cal), The University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), and the University of Arizona.[49] Thurman's high demand as a speaker among various public constituencies made him a perfect fit for Johnson's assemblage of high-powered young black scholars.

Rankin Chapel

At Howard, Thurman held two appointments: as a professor, teaching courses on philosophy and the psychology of religion, and as Howard's dean of the chapel. Once again, Thurman was able to live out his vocation as both minister and professor.[50] It was no coincidence that all of Thurman's academic appointments—at Spelman and Morehouse, Howard, and later Boston University—were dual in their role. He needed them in order to engage simultaneously

[48] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, cii-ciii.
[49] *Thurman Papers,* Vol. 1, cii-ciii.
[50] Thurman did not officially assume his appointment as Dean of the Chapel until 1935; he was promoted in absentia while on his trip to India. However, from his first day on campus, he always acted as chaplain of Rankin Chapel.

the religious meaning of life on intellectual grounds and within human experience. In Rankin Chapel, Thurman created a world where the intellectual and the lived elements of religion merged.

Thurman transformed Rankin Chapel into the proving ground for his spiritual and theological experimentation. From the chapel's pulpit, Thurman strove to grasp religiosity as it had been expressed in the vast expressions of human experience. The sources for Thurman's sermons and meditations moved in and out of the biblical canon. In addition to the Bible, Thurman used the words of non-Christian sacred texts, poets, novelist, philosophers, artists, and even mathematicians as inspiration for his homiletical reflections.[51] Thurman's use of these various sermonic sources is evidence of his endeavor "to demolish the artificial barrier between religion and life."[52] Though religious scholars may have viewed some of these sources as secular, Thurman aimed to explore what in these sources was "uniquely religious."[53] Reflecting on his work as a chaplain Thurman stated:

> [I was] always trying to find in the creative production of the mind this precious increment which was time transcendent and to me was religious . . . it was the *God word* expressed in the minds of the novelist, the playwright, the philosopher, the mathematician. . . .[54]

Thurman's chapel services exposed his audiences to a spirituality that was both pluralistic and democratic. Thurman held that each individual's faith, regardless of belief or professional discipline, carried equal spiritual footing and authority. Thurman's pluralistic religiosity enacted Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion that "The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand

[51]Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[52]Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Timber, ed., *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 193.
[53]Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."
[54]Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman: Parts 1 and 2."

to the full circle of the universe. . . ."[55] Thurman challenged the congregation of Rankin Chapel to seek religious inspiration in uncommon places, and thus blurred the line between the secular and the sacred.

Thurman's liberal and democratic religious ideals are further evidenced in the ministers he invited to preach in the Rankin Chapel. He recruited some of the greatest religious minds America had to offer, including Reinhold Niebuhr and Vernon Johns.[56] Rankin's pulpit was also filled by noted philosophers and religious scholars, among them Boston University's Edgar Brightman, Yale Divinity School's Roland H. Bainton, Haverford College's Douglass V. Steere, and Goucher College's Gertrude Carman Bussey.[57] Rankin Chapel's guest speakers also included a small number of non-Christians and non-religious speakers, such as Rabbi Hillel Silver of the Temple in Cleveland and famed botanist George Washington Carver.[58]

Thurman's creative spirituality was further accented in Rankin Chapel by his eclectic chapel services, conducted in the hope of captivating and freeing the congregants' imaginations. Through long and dramatic pauses in sermons, silent meditation, or—in one instance—dancing ballerinas, Thurman iconoclastically prodded his majority black audiences to experience religion in markedly different ways. A grand example of Thurman's worship experiments can be found in the 1939 Christmas series entitled "Living Madonnas." In these services, he recreated the six European Madonna masterpieces by using live subjects. Thurman and the members of Howard's

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[55] Editor Peter Knox, *Ralph Waldo Emerson Collection* (New York: Annotated Classics Kindle Edition).
[56] From Howard Thurman to Vernon Johns, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 172.; From Howard Thurman to Reinhold Niebuhr, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 174.
[57]"Howard to Hear Yale Professor," Apr 10, 1937, (The Washington Post), 8.; "Dr. Bussey to Talk To Howard Group" 25, April 1937, (The Washington Post), 5.; "Andrew Rankin Chapel," 13, May 1939, (The Washington Post), 6.
[58]"Colored Churches," 14, May 1932, (The Washington Post), 9; "Dr. George Carver Speaks Wednesday: Howard Students to Hear Master Chemist," Dec 10, 1933, (The Washington Post), 19.

fine arts faculty worked to "render in tableaux a life-size reproduction of each master piece [*sic*], giving careful attention composition, color, and costume."[59] Each living portrait was lit at different intervals in the service, allowing the congregation to take in the portraits one-by-one while the "Ave Maria" played in the background. Thurman's recreation of the Madonnas met with terrific fanfare, necessitating the use of two separate Saturday services in order to accommodate the large crowds. Howard Thurman's "Living Madonnas" program spread to other campuses and became a staple at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, and at other HBCUs.[60] One of the elements in these tableaux that may have played a major role in their popularity, as in the case of Howard University, was that Thurman used black Howard students in them. By Thurman's own admission, using black models to replicate European masterpieces enhanced the original artists' paintings for black viewers. "The colors of my models," he said,

[59] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 94.
[60] "'Living Madonnas' Are Enacted by Students at Bennett and Howard Univ.," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Dec 20, 1941, 14.

"were alive and various, and ranged from ivory to burnt umber. They were more beautiful than any painting."[61]

[61] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 94.

Figure A-1

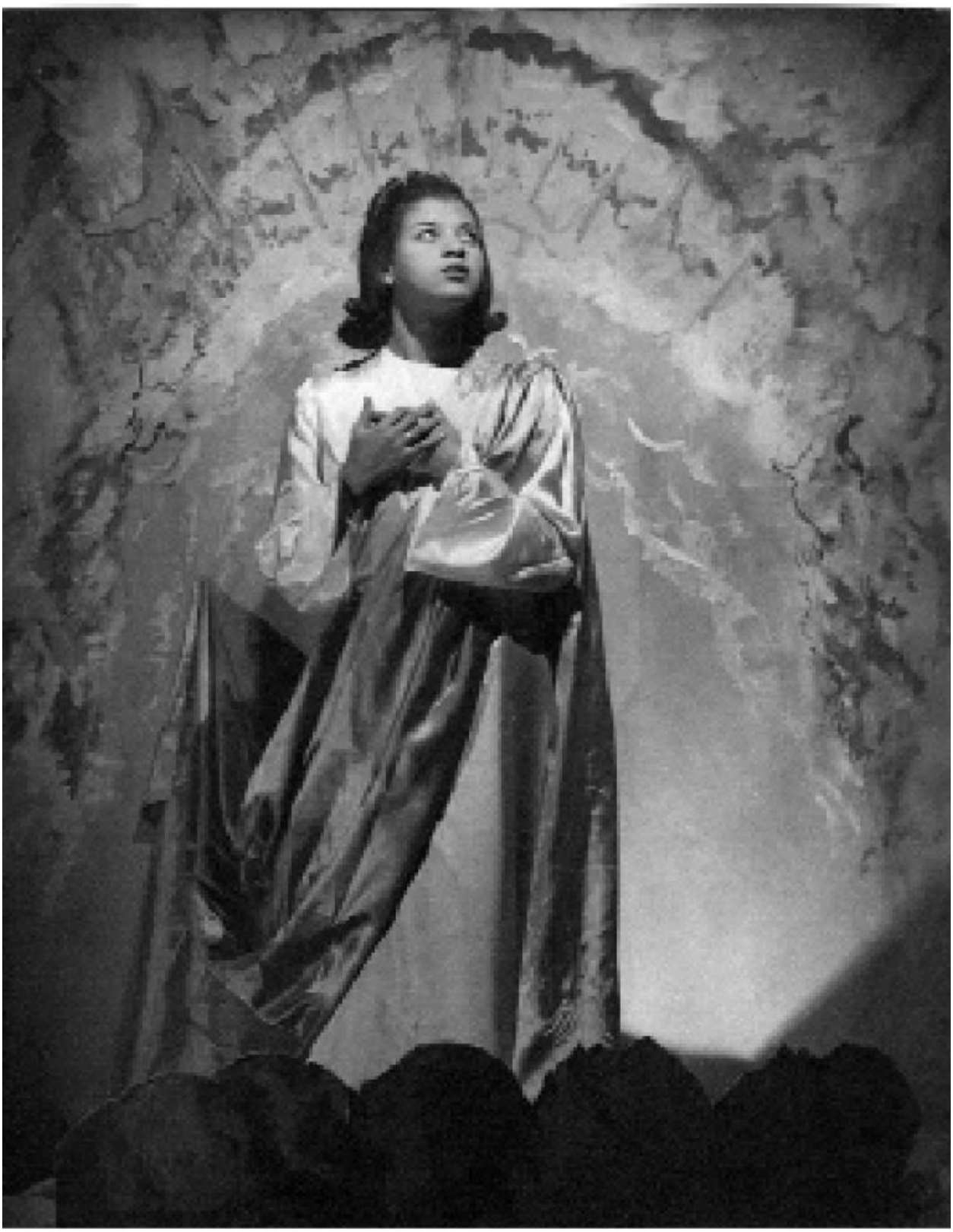
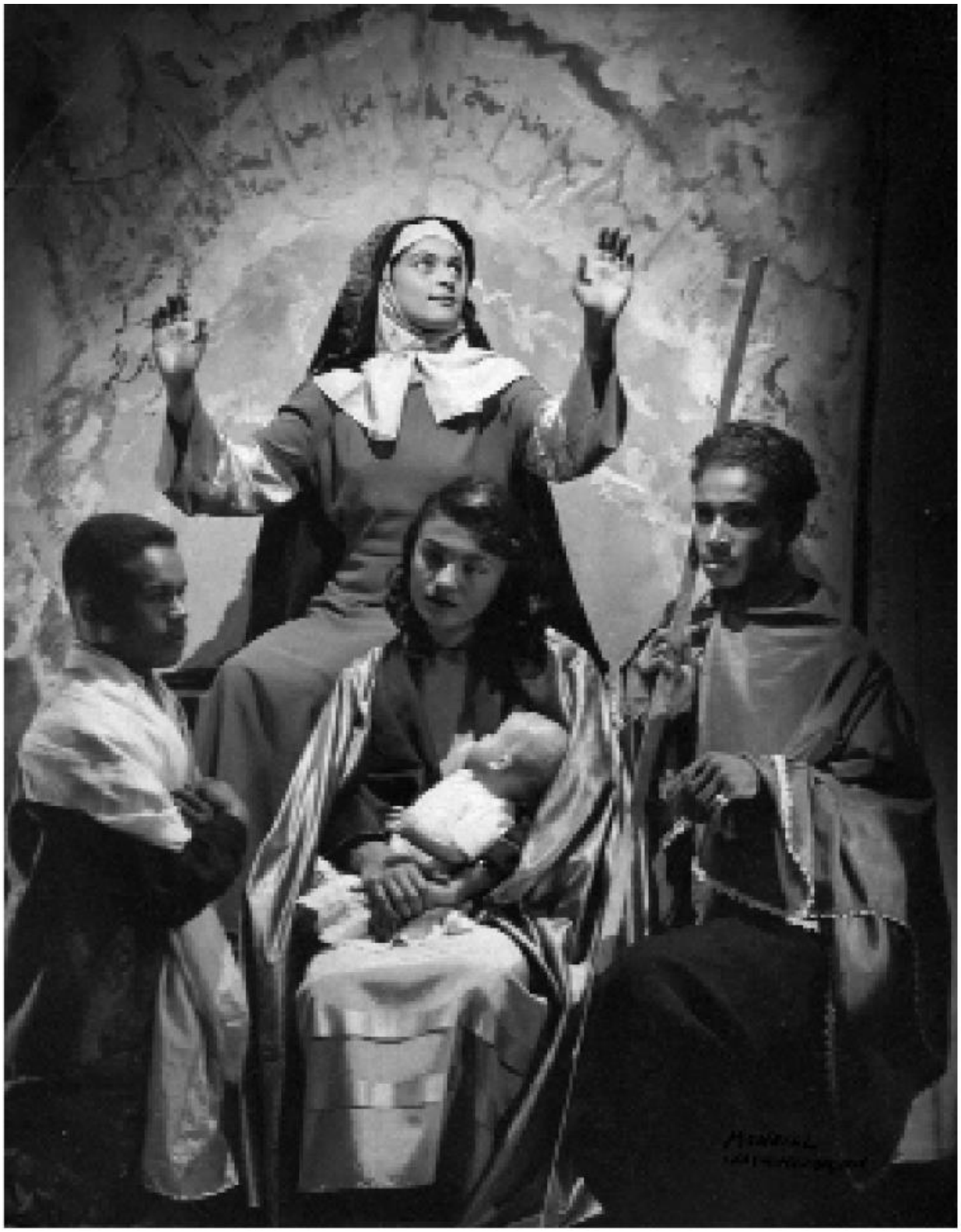


Figure A-2



Most of Thurman's "Living Madonnas" images displayed women of a darker hue acting as the Virgin Mary, coddling a white doll baby Jesus. Only one known image from the living portraits contained a light-skin-toned Mary (figure A-3). Thurman's dark-skinned Marys contrasted starkly with the usual American portrait of a white Virgin Mary in the 1930s and 1940s (Figures A-1 and A-2). Regrettably, in the 1930s, the only other images of blacks as biblical characters was in the movie *The Greener Pastures* (1936) directed by Marc Connelly and William Keighley. Indeed, Thurman's dignified "Living Madonnas" stood in stark contrast to Connelly's and Keighley's movie which was filled with "the romanticized images of black mammies, uncles, and 'pickaninnies'" dressed as biblical characters.[62]

Thurman's use of black models made a not-so-veiled statement about the politics of Christianity in America. At a time when black religious images were rare, Thurman's presentation of live black biblical figures appears to have been an appeal for racial inclusion. More specifically, Thurman's various renditions of the "Living Madonna" conveyed the need for blacks to be seen and see themselves as a vital part of American Christianity. Viewing the "Living Madonna" as a call for racial inclusion becomes even clearer when seen in the context of Thurman's and other HBCUs chaplains' work toward racial inclusion in the 1930s and 1940s.

[62]Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949* (Berkley: University of California Press), 72.

Figure A-3

In the early1940s, Thurman belonged to the short-lived Fellowship of Religious Workers in Negro Colleges and Universities. Comprised of 25 professors, students, chapel deans, and other administrators of HBCU campuses, this group attempted to influence how those on black college campuses thought about and discussed religion. Among the members were Thurman,

Mordecai Johnson, Howard Divinity School dean William Stuart Nelson, and Lincoln University's chapel dean Frank Wilson, the Fellowship's president. This group gathered to discuss such topics as religion and social change, and the role of black churches and black colleges in developing leaders. In 1943, the Fellowship of Religious Workers met at Bennett College and discussed steps for actively opposing segregation. The *Afro-American*, the leading black Baltimore newspaper, reported their recommendations:

> boycott[ing] of [J]im-crow establishments; organization of local interracial groups; develop[ing] of race-consciousness in ministers; support of existing agencies for education. . . . intelligent use of the ballot, illumination of personal prejudices, dissemination ideas of [a] conference [for an] entire student body [as well as] unified leadership.[63]

Ironically, in ministering to these needs in black communities, the Fellowship of Religious Workers attended to the very causes of racism that the majority of black churches did not. Unfortunately, most black churches of this era were not as nuanced or bold in their politics or theology as the members of the fellowship, nor were they inclined to act politically.

As historian Barbara Savage argued in her book *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, black intellectuals at the time seriously doubted the capacity of black churches for social reform and black social upheaval. Scholars such as Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Benjamin Mays thought that most black churches were too concerned about being heaven-bound to be of any earthly good. E. Franklin Frazier, the leading black sociologist of his time, charged the black churches with being "the most important institutional barrier to integration and the assimilation of Negroes [in the United States]."[64]

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[63] "Religious Workers Attend Conference at Bennett," The Baltimore Afro-American, Mar 20, 1943, 14.
[64] Barbara Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 112.

Unlike his intellectual peers, Howard Thurman never criticized black churches for their seeming disinterest in social engagement. Instead, he carved out a space at the Rankin Chapel that addressed social ills and pushed students, faculty, and staff to experience a black religiosity unconfined by the constraints of conservative Christian orthodoxy. The qualms Thurman had about black churches were rooted in his hope for a Christianity that included and welcomed all people in their diversity as an intricate part of a broader religious community. Although Thurman did not clearly articulate this desire in the 1930s, he indicated his commitment to an integrated American church in some of his writings. For example, in his review of sociologists Benjamin Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson's The *Negro Church*, he stated that the authors painted a "pathetic picture":

> the [black] churches seemed to be lacking in almost everything except in vitality. What a criminal indictment they are to the American white man's religion in whose midst they were established and subsequently developed! The story is an eloquent dramatization of the tragedy of the segregated church. To preach the Kingdom of God from a segregated pulpit is one of the profoundest kinds of atheism.[65]

Similar to Mays's ecclesiastical integrationist vision put forth in *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations* (1946), Thurman thought churches ought to be integrated spaces in order for them truly to manifest the kingdom of God ideal.[66] Thurman's later founding of Fellowship Church for All People in San Francisco was his effort to contend with America's most segregated places—churches.

A Proto-Post-Racialism: Thurman and the Young Turks

[65] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 173.
[66] Benjamin Elijah Mays, *Seeking to Be Christian in Race Relations* (New York: Friendship Press, 1946).

Thurman's integrationist theological politics extended beyond the churches. In articles, lectures, sermons, and personal reflections from this period, Thurman argued for the integration of America's businesses, schools, and voting booths. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, Thurman frequently weighed in on the lack of access blacks had to education, wealth, and political power. This racialized politics went against the grain of some of Howard's leading scholars. Howard social scientists Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche argued that economic class and not race was the primary cause of oppression for black Americans during the Great Depression.

Harris, Frazier, and Bunche—nicknamed the "Young Turks" for their radical politics—challenged the "race man" politics of the old Civil Rights vanguard, W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. They believed that the "race man" politics of the older black leadership only spoke to middle- and upper-class blacks. Howard's Young Turks called for a color-blind, class-concerned politics. As political scientist Charles P. Henry put it, the Young Turks were "Marxist in posture" and "assimilationist [to the] core."[67] They placed accounts of racialized oppression in the United States at arm's length.

The Young Turks formed a new generation of black elites. Each had trained at prestigious institutions. Frazier earned his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago; Abram Harris obtained his Ph.D. from Columbia University, becoming the second black person to hold a Ph.D. in economics; Ralph Bunche received his Ph.D. in political science from Harvard, the first black person to achieve a doctorate in that discipline. In their respective works, the Young Turks downplayed or ignored the severity of American race-based disparity and

[67] Charles P. Henry, "Ralph Bunche and the Howard School of Thought" (Institute of Governmental Studies, Public Affairs Report, May, 1992), 276.

inequality. In *Economic Foundations of American Race Division*, Harris's treatment of chattel slavery in America typified this racism-denying analysis by putting forth a de-racialized account of the impetus behind American slavery. "Slavery was an economic system," he wrote,

> which involved white freemen as masters and black men as slaves. The Negro was not enslaved because his complexion and nose and lip formation differed from the white man's. It would be just as reasonable to assign the servitude of white serfs to the color of their skin which conformed in paleness to that of the dominant whites. As a matter of fact both the lower white and black classes were weak. Their impotence coupled with the need for cheap labor meant their subjugation.[68]

Harris went on to discuss how black slave labor was used because it was cheaper than white labor, dismissing race as the primary cause of oppression. His analysis of slavery left out the complicated ways that slavery became an economic practice based on the dogma of white supremacy based on the belief that blacks were less than human.

In the end, Harris's "class over race" argument led him to espouse a political view that completely took black people's social conditions out of consideration. Such a denial came through most clearly in his exchange with writer V. F. Carlton. After lamenting the race-man politics of Du Bois and others of that generation, Harris said: "Sometime[s] I wish I could sit on the Woolworth Building and say God-Damn the Negro and his problems so loud that the pronunciation would ring in the ears of a universal audience."[69]

Bunche's academic work, similar to Harris's, can be seen taking on the same proto-post-racial political posture. *A World View of Race* (1936) is Bunche's full-throated articulation of a

[68]Abram L. Harris, *Economic Foundations of American Race Division* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1927), 472.
[69] Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche*, *1919–1941* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill and London, 2002), 116.

color-denying Marxist politics. Bunche accepted Harris's de-racialized account of American slavery, writing that "The Negro was enslaved not because of his race but because there were very definite economic needs which his enslavement served. The New World demanded his labor power. . . ."[70] Bunche went on to give descriptions and prescriptions for racial equality. Instead of calling for racial justice and equality on the part of blacks and their white comrades, Bunche believed American racial dissonance would be resolved by concentration on American class issues. Bunche spoke about this in detail:

> One of the latest and soundest views of the American race problem, and, for that matter, the race problem throughout the world, regards it, then, as merely one aspect of the class struggle. That is to say that differences in "race," differences in skin color, hair texture, language, religion or culture traits, are employed as devices by the privileged, ruling classes of the society to rationalize and promote their continued domination over and exploitation of the great numbers of the population. Thus it can be pointed out that the American Negro, by force of economic circumstances, is principally identified with the American working class and peasant elements of the population.[71]

Attending to oppressive class structures in America, Bunche called for blacks, particularly in the South, to join forces with white workers' unions (as if the white workers would welcome them). For Bunche, the integration of white and black proletarian forces would topple the white corporate elites' control of American capitalism. Bunche saw remedying class inequalities as the panacea for issues affecting blacks. "The Negro can make significant progress," he wrote, "toward these objectives against the obstacles of private prejudice and public discrimination and injustice, only by uniting with the poor whites of the South and North."[72] Bunche admitted this was a stretch for blacks who suffered under heightened racial tension: "This objective is

[70] Ralph Bunche, *A World View of Race* (Washington, D.C.: The Associates in Negro folk education, 1936), 78.
[71] Ralph Bunche, *A World View of Race*, 90.
[72] Bunche, *A World View of Race*, 91.

admittedly difficult of realization. Mutual suspicion and enmity between the white and black groups is an ever-present source of frustration."[73]

Likewise, Frazier thought that the black worker and the white worker needed to unite. He expressed his "race-not-class" politics in his condemnation of Du Bois's racial appeals. In a 1935 essay, "The Dubois Plan in the Present Crisis," Frazier caricatured Du Bois as a romantic intellectual who "toys with the ideas of the Negro as a separate cultural group."[74] Furthermore, Frazier called for a complete overhaul of black political programs put forth by such black leaders:

> The status of the [black] race in America, which has been determined by those economic forces which have shaped the country at large has remained unaffected by the programs of Negro leaders. Washington's program of industrial education and scientific farming offered no more salvation than Douglass' naïve faith that the Republican Party was the ship and all else the sea. Nor can Du Bois, either as the intellectual or the romanticist, furnish the kind of social criticism which is needed today in order that the Negro may orient himself in the present state of American capitalism.[75]

Frazier said that the black man needed to take on "a realistic conception of the capitalist economy and the hopelessness of his position in such a system."[76] Such a sole focus on economic issues required blacks to ignore problems that were equally crippling—if not more terrifying—such as lynching, segregation, and political disenfranchisement. Astoundingly, Frazier ignored these realities even after being nearly lynched about seven years earlier when he taught at Morehouse.

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[73] Bunche, *A World View of Race*, 90.
[74] Jonathan Scott Holloway and Ben Keppel, *Black Scholars on the Line: Race, Social Science, and American Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 294.
[75] Holloway and Keppel, *Black Scholars on the Line*, 294.
[76] Holloway and Keppel, *Black Scholars on the Line*, 293.

Du Bois did not allow the Young Turks' overly optimistic view of race relations to go unchallenged. In the 1930s and in his later reflections, Du Bois disagreed with their notion that white laborers would "accept without great reluctance the new scientific argument that there was no such thing as 'race'. . . ."[77] Du Bois found the young scholars' views particularly vexing given the racial climate in which blacks were "a despised minority, whose social chains [were] not loosed, and who [were held in] contempt [by] the white worker, even more than . . . capitalists and investors."[78] Du Bois also charged that the Young Turks' privileged the use of economic figures to the point that they ironically had missed the more intentional and systematic ways black lives had been devalued. While Du Bois grasped the economic despair of black America, he also underscored what Bunche, Frazier, and Harris did not: "[that blacks were] fleeing, not simply from poverty, but from insult and murder and social death."[79]

Like Du Bois, Thurman, Benjamin Mays, Alain Locke, and other humanities scholars at Howard, looked the truths of black life squarely in the face. Rather than safely mask them or cover them up in a neutral, color-blind economic analysis, these scholars stood firm as they described, lamented, and grappled with the realities of brutal race prejudice in America. Locke held that race inequalities in America had to be addressed in order to save American democracy, and the need to prevent this threat necessitated direct engagement with race. In 1942, Locke declared to the Progressive Education Association: "[W]e cannot get anywhere on [an] ostrich-

[77] W. E. B. Du Bois*, Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 150.
[78] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Right to Work," *The Crisis*, Vol. 40, no. 4, 1933, 93.
[79] Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 996; Kindle Edition.

head policy of ignoring minority differences . . . they cannot be expected to disappear in our or perhaps the next generation . . . they do not automatically cure or placate themselves. . . ."[80]

In 1939, Benjamin Mays wrote in "Racial Problems" that prejudice was a global problem. Mays compared racism in Australia, India, South Africa, and the United States to the antisemitism of Nazi Germany. He chastised America's governmental apparatus because it:

> maintain[ed] and perpetuate[d] a biracial civilization: separate schools, separate churches, separate or segregated places of amusement, separate Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A., segregated sections on the railroad, in trams (street cars) and buses—all of which led to gross inequality and discrimination in education, economics, and politics.[81]

As Mays confronted racism in the United States and throughout the world, he thought that the fight for racial equality was essential to Christianity. "To declare that 'we are all one in Jesus,'" he wrote, "and deny . . . the reality of the proclamation . . . in everyday living is to deny God and repudiate the Lordship of Jesus Christ."[82] Furthermore, Mays held that Christian apathy toward racial issues would undermine Christianity itself: "If the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot solve the race problem, Christianity is doomed."[83]

Howard Thurman appeared to fight American racism on more secular grounds. During the early 1940s, Thurman engaged racism in America through appeals to and critiques of America's democratic sensibilities. In a 1942 speech at the North Carolina College for

[80] Alain Locke, "The Negro in the Schools—Minority Rights in a Democracy," talk delivered to Annual Educational Conference of Teachers Union, Local 5, American Federation of Teachers, New York, 2 April 1938, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Box 164-120, Folder 9.
[81] Benjamin Mays, "Racial Problems," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Sep 16, 1939, A8.
[82] Benjamin Mays, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, October 14, 1939: 8
[83] Benjamin Mays, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, October 14, 1939: 8

Negroes—present-day North Carolina Central University—Thurman pointed out the peculiar role that blacks played in ensuring the survival of American democracy:

> The minority has a unique opportunity to maintain the sensitiveness essential to the democratic way of living. As a minority we are the first people to be sensitive to the loss of democratic principles of life.[84]

The conditions of inequality and political silence that minorities faced, especially black people, gave Thurman significant qualms about America's democratic capacities. The fact that black Americans had not experienced fully the benefits of democracy led Thurman to point out, "There is a vast difference in democracy and the American way of life."[85]

For Thurman, America could not achieve democracy until blacks could completely enjoy the democratic ideals: equality, justice, and freedom. Thurman's democratic vision brought into question the "class-not-race" analysis of the Young Turks. In a 1940 essay entitled "A Native Son Speaks," Thurman ruminated on the conditions of blacks in America and argued that they were not truly citizens.[86] Thurman reached this conclusion after noting that "[the Negro] is several steps removed from active participation in those social, economic, political arrangements by which our common body politic is controlled."[87] Thurman went on to state that because the responsibilities of citizenship "are denied the Negro" they missed out on the possibility of becoming "real citizens. . . ."[88]

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[84]"N C. College Students Hear Howard U. Chaplain: Responsibility Of Minority is Thurman Topic," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 23, 1942, C18.
[85]"N C. College Students Hear Howard U. Chaplain: Responsibility Of Minority is Thurman Topic," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 23, 1942, C18.
[86]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 250.
[87]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 250.
[88]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 250.

It is important to highlight that for Thurman democratic citizenship was defined by its active responsibility rather than passive privilege. For Thurman, citizenship in a democracy was an act. Indeed, citizenship required one to take on the responsibilities of voting, critiquing, and, in unfortunate circumstance, defending the nation within its armed forces. Citizenship amounted to the right to enter the nation's social, economic, and political life on an equal footing with any other citizen regardless of skin color.

By addressing the subject of citizenship, Thurman highlighted a reality that was unique to blacks in America. Though white workers wrestled with the hard truths of economic inequality, they still had the liberties, responsibilities, and securities that came with being a United States citizen. Meanwhile, the black proletariat had to contend with economic inequalities as well as the threat of race violence, segregation, and disenfranchisement. For Thurman, these forms of oppression were not simply a function of capitalism run amok. Even the most aristocratic of the black elite did not enjoy the securities, responsibilities, and freedoms of American citizenship.

For Thurman, black citizenship appears to have been worthy of the full breadth of black America's efforts, even the embodiment of black rage. Toward the end of "A Native Son Speaks," Thurman made an uncharacteristic rhetorical move when describing "the Negro['s] becoming aware to some degree of his citizenship." Thurman turned readers toward the black soldiers of World War I who had returned from war. These black soldiers, who had toiled and fought and whose comrades died for their country, returned only to remain the same non-citizens they had been. Many of these troops had experienced the freedom of democracy within the military and overseas, yet upon their return "American society sought to place the Negro back

into his position of anonymity."[89] According to Thurman, in Northern cities there began to be civil unrest among blacks who began expressing their "wild resentment" by rioting. Thurman ultimately found that the "rioting was a sign of life, of an awakening citizenship."[90]

It is important to remember that Thurman was a pacifist and that at the time he was a vice-chairman of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the leading pacifist organization in America. Thurman was willing to risk his pacifist politics for the sake of black citizenship and dignity. Thurman did not criticize the Northern riots that followed black soldiers' demobilization because to him as they were "a sign of life" in the face of black bodies previously signifying insecurity, misery, and death. In a world where blacks were subject to lynchings, segregation, and disenfranchisement, perhaps it occurred to Howard Thurman that violent protest was the only way to affirm black dignity.

Thurman's appeals for human rights and dignity began to be more prominent themselves in his efforts with the Fellowship for Reconciliation. At the same time, Thurman's politics and religiosity expanded further after his trip to India and meeting with Gandhi. More specifically, Thurman's work at the Fellowship Church for All Peoples in San Francisco radically illustrates his pluralistic sensibilities as he and parishioners engaged Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism in their particularities.

[89]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 250.
[90]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 250.

Chapter 6: The Pilgrimage of Friendship, FOR, and Fellowship Church

At Howard, Thurman recommitted himself to leftist religious causes and organizations by working further with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) for the cause of pacifism and by contacting communities that sought to connect with other oppressed racial minorities. Thurman also began to reach out to broader communities of faith, most of which were non-Christian. . His nascent religious and political pluralism that had begun to grow during his Oberlin pastorate was further nurtured by his experiences as a delegate on the Pilgrimage of Friendship to India and a visit with Mahatma K. Gandhi.

The Pilgrimage of Friendship

In 1935, the YMCA and YWCA national committees decided to recruit Thurman as the head of a black delegation to India. Indians had responded to the missionary movement there in two ways: some had converted to a conservative Evangelical Christianity and accepted all of the Western cultural assumptions that accompanied such Christianity; others rejected Christianity precisely because it was so interwoven with Western ways, especially the British imperialism that oppressed them. Spurred by the famous American missionary E. Stanley Jones, the Y's hope that by sending black American Christians who were analogously oppressed yet confessed Christ as savior, Indians would be more likely to convert.

E. Stanley Jones tried to make Christianity appealing to Indians in the context of British domination. Jones, a Methodist missionary, had come to India in 1907 and sympathized with the Indian movement for liberation. In *The Christ of the Indian Road,* Jones depicted Indians infusing Christianity with elements of their indigenous religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—and their experiences of suffering under British rule. He argued that non-indigenous

missionaries needed to find common ground with Indians and respect the rich history and culture of the Indian subcontinent. For Jones, too often Western missionaries had "attempted the task of winning India for Christ as though it were a country of barbarians, whereas it is a country of civilized people. . . ."[91] Jones viewed the Indian people as intellectual and religious equals, not as culturally inferior and religiously depraved. Although many Indian non-believers "disagree[d] with what [Jones was] saying," they came to agree that "we can certainly all try to be like Jesus Christ."[92]

Jones wanted to have a delegation of black Christians go to India and share Christianity from their experience as a similarly dominated people who heard the good news of Christ as a message that criticized such domination. He originally envisioned a delegation of musicians who would tour India singing Negro Spirituals. Such a tour probably would have met with much fanfare because Christians and non-Christians had responded enthusiastically to the Fisk University Jubilee Singers who had toured India in the1880s.[93] Jones told Thurman that he wanted the delegation "to be singing, soul-saving evangelists, full of the grace of God as that grace manifested itself in what it had done for . . . black people in American society."[94]

Thurman did not share that aim with Jones. Were he to go on such a trip, he wanted to go with a delegation that saw themselves as fellow "seekers of knowledge . . . [who] sought to deepen the knowledge of *all* people, including the Americans, concerning Afro-Americans."[95]

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[91] E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abington Press, 1925), 85.
[92] E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road*, 86.
[93] "The Fisk Jubilee Singers," *The Times of India*, Jan 3, 1890, 3.
[94] Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Mariner Books, 1981), 116.
[95] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 116.

Thurman and the rest of the delegation had no intention of going to proselytize non-Christian Indians:

> We determined to steer clear of fitting into an evangelical mode as defined for us by other Christians. Our purpose was to give the Indian people free access to our feeling about ourselves and our idiom. We wanted to be true to the spirit and the teaching of Jesus as we understood it, while at the same time steering clear of the obvious need of Christianity to be bolstered up by members of the darker races.[96]

After the "singing-the-Spirituals" plan died, the Y's decided that a group of exceptional, relatively young black leaders should go. This arrangement faced the problem of recruitment because it was difficult to raise funds for such a group and find scholars and pastors who could be gone from their positions and families for an extended period. The delegation that wound up going to India was made up of Thurman, his wife Sue Bailey Thurman, Rev. Edward G. Carroll, and his wife Phenola Valentine Carroll. Thurman as the Dean of Chapel at Howard had already solidified his outstanding academic pedigree and professional achievements. Sue Bailey Thurman had earned her bachelor's degree in music and the liberal arts at Oberlin. Edward Carroll, a Methodist minister in Virginia, had attended Morgan State College and Yale Divinity School.[97] Phenola Carroll's membership in the delegation was a point of contention for Thurman. Originally, Grace Hamilton Townes, the dean of Lemoyne Owens College, was to have been the fourth member.[98] Townes had a budding career as a college administrator and a psychologist, and had a strong record with the YWCA. Townes, however, rescinded her commitment early in 1935 because she had to care for her four-year-old son.[99] In contrast to Townes, Phenola Carroll, though a graduate of Morgan State College, had yet to make a

[96] Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 116.
[97] *Thurman Papers,* Vol. 1, 180.
[98] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 191.
[99] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 191.

career.[100] Thurman lamented the possibility of her filling the vacancy left by Townes because he wanted the women on the trip to be seen as even more accomplished than the men. Thurman discussed his displeasure in a letter to the YMCA's organizing committee:

> If the personnel stays as it is in the light of the latest decision [to add Phenola Carroll to the delegation], I shall ask Sue [Bailey Thurman] to resign her place on it. It is extremely unwise and of very poor judgement to have two couples making up the delegation. It will be impossible to convince anyone that the selection of the team plus the responsibility reposing on each member has not been done because they are man and wife and because they are four individuals who in judgement of the Committee are the four persons best able to do this particular job.[101]

The correspondence does not reveal what finally satisfied Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman's displeasure with the delegation roster. Perhaps the possibilities of the trip outweighed such considerations. The Thurmans and the Carrolls—the Pilgrimage of Friendship—set sail for India in October, 1935.

The Pilgrimage of Friendship was a nearly seven-month journey with various scheduled stops and speaking engagements throughout India, including a visit with Mahatma K. Gandhi. The delegation visited and spoke with Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and multi-religiously affiliated groups as well as students and professors of numerous Indian colleges and universities. Each member of the delegation delivered his or her reflections on Christianity and race politics in America. Edward Carroll gave 65 sermons and lectures that addressed black experiences in America and American Christianity.[102] Phenola Carroll only spoke 23 times, confirming Thurman's initial objection to her having a place in the delegation.[103] Sue Bailey Thurman, by

[100]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 315
[101]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 315.
[102]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 283.
[103]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 283.

contrast, acted in a dual role as a lecturer and musician. She lectured 69 times on Christianity and her experiences as a black woman in the United States, and she sang and taught Negro Spirituals to the Indian communities in which they stayed.[104]

For Thurman, the trip was both grueling and inspiring. He usually spoke no less than twice a day in 45-minute intervals—totaling 165 speaking engagements throughout the tour.[105] His speeches usually focused on the state of blacks in America, a variety of religious topics, or his understanding of the Christian faith. In addresses such as: "The Faith of the Negro," "[The] Negro in American Life," "American Negro Political Questions," and "Deep River" (probably a version of his reflections on the Spirituals), Thurman "discussed the many problems that had confronted the American Negro during [the past] and . . . . [the] problems [in] contemporary Negro life. . . ."[106] Thurman's and the other delegates' speeches were received with both fanfare and controversy. Around 4,000 people attended at least one of his talks.[107] In the questions and answer period after each talk, the audiences often asked about American life, politics, and religion such as: "Do you have caste distinctions in the Christian Church in America?" "Does it make any difference in race feeling on the part of white Americans when Negroes become Christians?" "Are American Indians included in your student movement?" "Do American students know anything about religions other than their own?" "Why is it the policy of American mission boards not to send Negroes to the foreign field?" "If Christianity has the answer to materialism, why has it not been effective in this regard in the civilizations of the West?"[108]

[104]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 283.
[105]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 283.
[106]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 298.
[107]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 286.
[108]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 330.

The Pilgrimage's members exposed Indians to a form of Christianity that white evangelists had not presented. Other than Jones and a few like-minded missionaries, Indians more frequently heard conservative, proselytizing, paternalistic preachers who only wished to elicit immediate profession-of-faith conversions. Consequently, many of the Indians were suspicious of Christianity, considering Christianity and British imperialism to be more or less one and the same, and making India a particular challenge for Thurman as a Christian minister. Thurman reflected on what became a famous, pointed exchange between him and a Hindu lawyer:

> A young lawyer said, "What are you doing here? This is what I mean—Africans were taken to America as slaves, by [Christians]—they were sold in America to other [Christians]—they were held in slavery for 300 years by Christians—they were freed as a result of economic forces rather than [Christian] idealism. . . . I understand that you are lynched in America by [Christians]. In the light of all this, I think that for a young intelligent Negro such as you to be over here in the interest of a [Christian] enterprise is for you to be a traitor to all darker peoples of the earth. Such I consider you to be. Will you please account for yourself and your very unfortunate position?[109]

The questioner took Thurman to task and exposed the very issue with which many black Christians were contending: How does one account for being both black *and* Christian? Thurman tackled the question by drawing a sharp distinction between the religion of Jesus and Christianity. According to Thurman, Christianity became corrupt when it aligned with the Roman Empire, straying when it bolstered the Roman Empire rather than following the religion of Jesus. At this point, Christianity became a religion that preserved the "right to exploit the weak and [to] be served by [the weak]."[110] Thurman went on to place himself among "a small minority of [Christians] who believe that society has to be completely reorganized in a very

[109]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 302.
[110]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 302-303.

definite egalitarian sense if life is to be made livable for the most of mankind" in accord with Jesus' message and life.[111]

Thurman's race and liberal Christianity indeed placed him in an egalitarian relationship with Indians and enabled him to engage in interfaith dialogue with Indians, unlike his conservative, evangelical counterparts. Akin to William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1903), Thurman endeavored to find "the essence of the religious experience[s]. . ." he encountered in India.[112] In his visits to Muslim mosques, and Hindu and Buddhist temples, Thurman absorbed a world that was altogether foreign, drinking deeply from the well of pluralism. Thurman welcomed the "the smells, the altars, the flowers, the chanting—all of [which] was completely outside [his] universe of discourse."[113] Thurman found himself in a place where "[he] could stand side by side with a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Moslem, and know that the authenticity of his experience was identical with the essence and authenticity of [his] own."[114]

The major highlight of the trip was Thurman's meeting with the internationally famous Mahatma Gandhi. By the mid-1930s, Gandhi was well known for non-violent activism in South Africa and an ongoing campaign in India for freedom from British oppression and social improvement for all. Gandhi's non-violent protest in South Africa (1900–1914), Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922), and the Salt March to the Dandi (1930) all were well-known current events to intellectuals throughout the world. Scholars at Howard began to consider using Ghandi-inspired non-violent action in black Americans' struggle for civil rights.

[111]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 303.
[112]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 120.
[113]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 120.
[114]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 120.

In 1931, Mordecai Johnson had praised Gandhi's work during a benefit at the Community Church in Boston by declaring that "the Negro of America needs such men as Gandhi who will persistently see that justice is fairly administered, and that the white man released from his fetters of prejudice, does not think 'whitely and capitalistically.'"[115]

The Pilgrimage of Friendship met with Gandhi in his 15th year of political opposition to the British Crown which was also the 77th year of British rule.[116] British occupation of India had begun in 1858 when the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act in the aftermath of the 1857 India Rebellion against the British East India Company (BEIC). The BEIC originated in 1600 as a conglomerate of British merchants who sought to do trade in India, and it ruled large parts of India with its private armies.[117] In 1857, the BEIC's private army, made up of Indian soldiers, revolted against the company as a result of economic, religious, and political discrimination. After British troops put down the rebellion two years later, the British government took over the BEIC and strengthened its imperial dominance over India.

The British government ruled Indians with an iron fist, forcing them into social and economic subservience in their own land. Under the 1858 Act, many Indians were forced into abject poverty with their only employment option being servant work for British families and companies. Indian oppression was made even worse by the British government's heavy taxation of the Indian. Finally, and most importantly, Indians were forbidden from developing any

[115]"Red Cross Can't Help Being Biased, Dr. Mordecai Johnson Tells Boston," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Feb 28, 1931, 20.
[116] Chandriks Kaul, "From Empire to Independence: The British Raj in India 1858–1947," http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/independence1947_01.shtml, March 3, 2011.
[117]Chandriks Kaul, "From Empire to Independence: The British Raj in India 1858–1947."

manufacture of goods. This provision economically crippled the Indian masses who had long benefitted from the production of salt, silk, opium, indigo, and tea.[118]

Gandhi found ways to implement his nonviolent philosophy of *satyagraha*—which means insistent truth—to protest the British control of the Indian state and its people.[119] Appealing to *satyagraha*, Gandhi said that protest must involve "no [acts of] violence under any circumstance whatsoever" and "ever insist upon truth."[120] He insisted upon the truth of Indians' right to freedom, equality, and human decency; and he used mass marches, fasting, boycotting, and other forms of direct, nonviolent protest to press the point. To protest British economic control, Gandhi encouraged his more affluent countrymen and women to boycott British-made clothing and to wear instead simple, white cotton garments made by their hands. The fact that such clothing was what the poor wore said to the British that even the non-poor would rather wear the clothing of the poor instead of being subservient and wearing more prestigious British fabric. The Salt March of 1930 was a premier moment in Gandhi's nonviolent acts of economic disruption. During the march, Gandhi and thousands of followers walked 240 miles to the Dandi River to make a handful of salt, an act considered to be the manufacture of salt and thus an act of civil disobedience. Gandhi's simple protest led millions of Indians to repeat the act and break the law.

Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman went to Gandhi hoping to bring Gandhi's nonviolent protest method back to the United States. Initially scheduled to last a few days, the meeting lasted only a disappointing three hours. For most of the meeting, Thurman presented the history and conditions of blacks in America. Toward the end of their time, however, the Thurmans had

[118]Chandriks Kaul, "From Empire to Independence: The British Raj in India 1858–1947."
[119] Uma Majmudar, *Gandhi's Pilgrimage of Faith: from Darkness to Light* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 138.
[120]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 335.

the chance to pose tough questions to Gandhi about the possibility and utility of black non-violent activism in America. Thurman asked the basic questions: "[H]ow are we to train individuals or communities in this difficult art?" ". . . [C]an one man keep violence at bay?" "Is non-violence from your point of view a form of direct action?"[121] Gandhi answered Thurman's questions and explained that non-violence was a kind of direct action. He told Thurman that "without a direct active expression of it, non-violence to my mind is meaningless."[122] Thurman received Gandhi's answer with hope for America.

By contrast, Sue Bailey Thurman had less hope that non-violent direct action could affect the kind of change black people needed to free themselves from the injustices of American racism. Sue questioned the lack of racial diversity in Gandhi's movement as well as the practicality of non-violence for black people in American. She asked Gandhi to account for the strange absence of black Africans from his movement in South Africa. Furthermore, Sue pressed Gandhi's non-violent politics to address the cold truths of black life in America, when she asked, "How am I to act, supposing my own brother was lynched before my very eyes?"[123]

Gandhi responded by steering Sue to view non-violence as a way of life in which a person "must be a living sermon."[124] He believed blacks must simultaneously "not wish ill to [whites], but neither . . . co-operate with them. . . ."[125] Furthermore, Gandhi believed that blacks must not "co-operate with . . . brother Negroes who tolerate the wrong."[126] At first, Gandhi's call for black non-cooperation with the white economic structure may appear as acquiescence instead

[121]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 336.
[122]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 336.
[123]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 336.
[124]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 336
[125]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 336.
[126]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 336.

of protest. However, in the time of Jim Crow segregation and the rule of de facto and de jure racial discrimination laws, non-co-operation was, in fact, a form of protest. The nature of Gandhi's conversation with the Thurmans demonstrates that more orthodox forms of black non-violent forms of protest figured as definite possibilities in Gandhi's mind.

After the meeting, Thurman appears to have accepted Gandhi's understanding of non-violent activism. In a 1943 letter to James Farmer, Thurman's protégé and later founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE, 1942), Howard Thurman described non-violent civil disobedience as "an act of the will arising out of a profound spiritual conviction, which by its very nature is devoid either of ill-will, contempt, or cowardice."[127] For Thurman, non-violent civil disobedience had a sacred nature because it provided a way for people to witness to the truth of equal human dignity in each and every person, and to witness the ways that existing systems, attitudes, and actions denied such truth. Non-violent civil disobedience could also elicit violent public reactions as it did in India when protesters were beaten, imprisoned, and killed. Thurman thus considered non-violent resistance as "the final gesture of the human spirit before martyrdom."[128] Yet, as Gandhi bid adieu to the delegation, he mused that "it may be through the Negro that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world."[129]

Return to the United States

When Thurman returned from India, he suffered severe depression. A year later, he wrote Samuel Archer, his friend and dean from his Morehouse years, saying that "India was great, inspiring and depressing."[130] Exhausted from the twice-a-day speaking regimen,

[127]From Howard Thurman to James Farmer, March 11, 1943, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 329.
[128]From Howard Thurman to James Farmer, March 11, 1943, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 329.
[129]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 337.
[130]From Howard Thurman to Samuel Archer, 14 April 1936, *Thurman Papers,* Vol. 2, 1.

Thurman's fatigue was intensified by the fact that the trip was underfunded. Even Thurman's mother, Alice Sams, knew of the financial tailspin that the India trip caused the Thurmans. She wrote sympathetically to her son: "I know you [went] broke on your India trip. . . ." [131] Throughout the trip, the delegation had to seek monetary support from India's YMCAs and other charitable groups in order for their tour to continue. Thurman had taken an unpaid sabbatical for what amounted to an entire academic year, and upon his return to the United States found himself nearly penniless. This circumstance forced him into a highly demanding lecturing and preaching schedule to make up the loss. At least twice a month, Thurman went out of town to speak for honoraria. Thurman wrote to a friend, "[I've] been on the go day and night since my return from India."[132]

Thurman's exhaustion was only made worse by the pressures put upon him by the black public, a demand he had not encountered in the past. In a short time, this new expectation turned Thurman away from becoming a black political leader. Contemporaries who expected him to play a public, potential role attributed his so-called failure to his attraction to mysticism. In the later 1930s, a young black activist remarked, "I'm disappointed in him. We thought we had found our Moses. And he turns out to be a mystic."[133] Thurman's mysticism, as he articulated it in "Mysticism and Social Change" in 1938, was overtly political, but he did not develop or push this belief into a nationwide political or social movement. That said, Thurman's inability or lack of desire to launch a movement is an unfair assessment of his work because it discounts the timely circumstances that generate major political movements—people's reaching civil and

[131]From Alice Sams to Howard Thurman, June 1936, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 13.
[132]"Howard Thurman to Stella Scurlock," 27 May 1937, *Howard Washington Thurman Papers Project*.
[133]Howard Thurman, "Introduction" (Liner Notes), *The Living Wisdom of Howard Thurman: A Visionary for Our Time* (Boulder: Sounds True, Inc., 2010), 2.

social tipping points, public access to reports about civil conflict through new forms of media, and a significant rise in the frustrations and courage of everyday people.

Thurman did not have the charismatic personality of Gandhi or, later, Martin Luther King, Jr. As a preacher Thurman was cerebral and engaging but not a captivating or highly enthusiastic preacher like C. L. Franklin or King. Highly unusual for black preachers, Thurman often incorporated sustained periods of silence in his sermons, extending to five minutes at times. Anthony Campbell, one of Thurman's students, recalled what Thurman said about his preaching style when Thurman caught Campbell playfully imitating him. Campbell said that Thurman:

> had a way of speaking that could appear to be very dangerous. He would say, He would say, "Everywhere"—Campbell pauses—"I go"—another pause—"I see"—yet another pause—"Jes—us." You'd almost think he forgot his lines. One day I was imitating [him]. . . . [He] caught me making fun of him in the pulpit! He said to me, "You've got it all wrong. I don't pause. I use silences like other people use words." He said, "Secondly, I always preach standing on one foot. So when my leg gets tired, I know it's time for me to end that sermon."[134]

Thurman's preaching style struck most congregations as charming, but his unique use of silent pauses did not fit most Americans' expectations of a larger-than-life movement leader.

Though not a charismatic political preacher, Thurman engaged American and international politics through his work in the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Joining the organization no later than 1930, by 1940, Thurman was serving as its vice president. Thurman had a longstanding relationship with the FOR that extended from his student days at Morehouse. Unfortunately, neither the FOR nor Thurman left a paper trail documenting his early years in the organization. The only record of Thurman's involvement in the organization before his Howard

[134]Dick Russell, *Black Genius and the American Experience* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1998), 424.

appointment appears in a small 1930 newspaper article that reported Thurman, Benjamin Mays, and 36 other Southern black professors denouncing the increase in lynching and, with support from the FOR, insisting on a federal anti-lynching bill.[135]

His commitment to pacifism made it natural for him to align further with the FOR. A complete articulation of Thurman's pacifism can be found in a 1929 article entitled "'Relaxation and Race Conflict" in which Thurman defined his pacifism in opposition to the pacifism of many white pacifists. The article appeared in an edited volume *Pacifism in the Modern World* that featured articles by such figures as Reinhold Niebuhr, FOR President A .J. Muste, Rufus Jones, and 11 other Christian leftists on the topic of pacifism.[136] Early in the essay, Thurman expressed a leeriness about whites' use of pacifism. He found that white pacifists promoted a "philosophy of pacifism that makes few, if any, demands upon their ethical obligation to minority groups with which they may be having contacts."[137] Thurman's concern over whites' color-blind pacifism were twofold: (1) Thurman worried that color-blind pacifism would overlook the violence that was specifically present in black life; and (2) he feared that color-blind pacifism, once passed down to blacks and other minorities, would become an "imitation of the majority."[138] He feared that upper-class blacks would "look upon the [lowest] members of his race [just] as the dominant group [the whites] looks upon them."[139]

Thurman reimagined pacifism by seeking to have it speak to both black and white, making it color-concerned rather than color blind. For Thurman, pacifism called one to "the will to share joyfully the common life and the will to love all—healingly and creatively. It springs out

[135]"Educators Denounce Increase in Lynchings," *New York Times*, Jan 5, 1931, 25.
[136]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 144.
[137]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 146.
[138]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 145.
[139]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 148.

of a sense of the unity, the basic interrelation and the vast sacredness of all life."[140] Thurman's pacifism demanded that dominant white society cease the subjugation and terrorizing of blacks lives, and for blacks to resist the impulse to hate the white majority as well as to abstain from replicating white hierarchical ideals in their own communities.

Thurman directly extended his color-concerned pacifism into his work with the FOR. By 1940, Thurman had risen to the vice chairmanship of the FOR, working closely with the organization's noted president A. J. Muste and its other social activists. Even as he sat at the helm of the leading non-sectarian American pacifist body, he remained critical of its politics. For instance, when he accepted the vice chair position, Thurman highlighted the contradictions black pacifists faced:

> Negro men and women need so much more counseling during these times than ordinarily. The complications of our social order make it very difficult to keep clear of critical conflicts. For instance, I am sure that the thousands of Negro [troops] who will be taken into camp should not be deserted by other Negroes like me. Often our very presence will stay the hands of brutality and cruelty on the part of white men who are in position[s] of authority over them and whose normally weak scruples as to treatment are almost thoroughly routed by the customary moral disintegration opened by war. And yet I know war is not only futile but is thoroughly and completely evil and diabolical. What my duty is as a Christian is sometimes very obscure.[141]

Neither Thurman nor Muste and other FOR members believed that pacifism was the panacea for American racism. Specifically, Thurman understood that black pacifists often needed to work within and with organizations and entities that did not necessarily agree with pacifist principles in order to work for the greater good.

[140] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 151.
[141] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 265.

James Farmer, chairman of CORE, took a similar stance in relation to pacifist politics of the time. In his autobiography *Lay Bare the Heart*, Farmer told how CORE emerged from disagreements over pacifist politics within the FOR. Farmer and FOR president Muste had a heated exchange over whether or not CORE would be a strictly pacifist organization or actively oppose systemic forms of violence such as race hatred and racial discrimination. By establishing CORE, Farmer sought to unite pacifists and non-pacifists in the fight against racism. "I want CORE to become a mass movement," he wrote.

> The masses of Negroes [w]ill not become pacifist. Being Negro is tough enough for them without being a pacifist, too. Neither will the masses of whites. Some individuals, no doubt, will see the effectiveness of domestic nonviolence and will transfer [it] to the international scene; that will be fine. Others will not, and, that too will be acceptable.[142]

Muste had misgivings about FOR's involvement with such a project because he thought that aligning with non-pacifists would create confusion and disruption in his own organization.

Thurman and Farmer's critical appraisal of pacifist politics spoke to the greater complexities of black pacifist politics. Unlike Muste and other white pacifists, the small number of black pacifists lacked the political and financial resources to engage pacifist circles only. Even the black intelligentsia had doubts about the power of non-violent activism to achieve black freedom. Major black political figures and organizations of the 20th century—W. E. B. Du Bois, A. Phillip Randolph, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—never endorsed the concept of black pacifism or non-violent resistance. Precisely because they were black, black pacifists did not have the leverage of their white peers to tap well-established pacifist and religious associations for political and financial support. White

[142] James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House Publishing, 1985), 111.

pacifists along with the majority of white liberal organizations rarely had a marked interest in race matters. A. J. Muste's interest in race issues standout as an anomaly. From Henry David Thoreau in the 19th century to Rufus Jones and Harry Emerson Fosdick in the early 20th century, white pacifists had turned a blind eye to the violence that faced black Americans daily. They focused instead on violence in the international arena, especially war and the threat of war between countries.

White pacifists' avoidance of racial conflict in the United States created peculiar circumstances for black pacifists such as Thurman and Farmer. Thurman found himself forced to deal with the American military—a relationship that morally disgusted him—in order to advocate for the fair treatment of black troops. Farmer thought that the American pacifist movement could not sustain a movement for racial equality on its own, and that he needed to go beyond the narrow gaze of pacifist politics in order to gain, speak to, and work with a wider group of political comrades. Thurman, Farmer, and other black pacifists thus had to utilize an alternative approach to work on behalf of America's disenfranchised black minority.

Venturing Beyond Howard and the Making of Fellowship Church

After the trip to India, Thurman increasingly associated with religious and academic communities outside of Howard University in an effort to explore other vocational and career paths. What was becoming clearer was his commitment to building and living in race-conscious and non-sectarian communities. Possibilities for different roles in higher education and employment at other institutions arose. Between the early 1930s and early 1940s, three black colleges offered Thurman their presidency: Morehouse College, Shaw University, and Florida

Memorial College (the collegiate outgrowth of his high school).[143] In the 1938–1939 academic year, Thurman was a visiting professor at Rochester Seminary and likely engaged in talks with Rochester's administration about a more permanent position on the school's faculty.[144] He was also a frequent guest preacher at the prestigious Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago, the oldest and one of the most prestigious black Baptist churches in the nation. Olivet, it turned out, had a definite interest in calling Thurman as their pastor. In 1941, Thurman even preached a trial sermon at Olivet. Although Thurman had a secure lifetime appointment at Howard, he wrote one of Olivet's lay leaders, "I am prepared . . . to consider prayerfully, and with as much judgment as is available to me, the challenge and opportunity a fine church like Olivet offers."[145]

By 1943, Thurman's attention had turned to the West Coast. He began serious discussions with the leadership of the Fellowship Church for All Peoples of San Francisco, a newly started, non-denominational, racially integrated church. Fellowship Church wanted him to consider becoming a co-pastor there with the founder and current pastor Alfred Fisk, a white philosophy professor at San Francisco State University and Presbyterian minister. Fisk had studied at Union Theological Seminary for his B.D. and at the University of Edinburgh for his Ph.D.[146] He had started Fellowship Church specifically intending to build a racially and religiously integrated community. One year later, A. J. Muste introduced Thurman to Fisk with the thought that Thurman would assist Fisk in identifying a suitable black co-pastor for Fellowship Church.[147] Thurman originally recommended his close friend Herbert King, senior pastor of Plymouth Baptist Church, an influential black congregation in Washington, D.C. King,

[143]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 1.
[144]*Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, lii.
[145] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 2, 271.
[146]Walter Earl Fluker, ed., *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume 3: The Bold Adventure, September 1943–May 1949* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), xxv.
[147]Howard Thurman to Alfred G. Fisk, October 25, 1943, *Thurman Papers,* Vol. 3, 5.

an alumnus of Oberlin and Union Theological Seminary, had a marked interest in the progressive work of Fellowship Church, but he decided not to pursue the opportunity because he "was at a point in life where his financial obligations made it impossible for him to consider [the] position without more support."[148] Fellowship Church was still in its infancy and only paid a meager $200 per month.[149]

Unable to secure King for the job, Fisk began wooing Thurman. Despite the extremely low salary, Fisk knew that Fellowship Church offered Thurman the rare opportunity to actively integrate and expand the religious scope of the American church. Particularly attractive was the action that Fellowship Church had taken in training its members in non-violent activism under the black pacifist activist Bayard Rustin. Fellowship Church held distinct promise for the Thurmans' dream of "a religious fellowship [that] could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers, with a carry over into the common life."[150] Fisk thought Thurman was the man who could lead Fellowship Church from its humble beginning to become a nationally-known model for churches and cities throughout the United States. Remarking the changes that San Francisco had recently undergone because of black migration during the Depression, Fisk observed that "things have been on the move here in San Francisco. And now if Howard Thurman could come, it would be a climax in this movement toward the firm establishment of a socially integrated community."[151] As a seasoned and well-known black minister, Thurman could offer steady leadership and visibility to the church.

[148]Alfred Fisk to Howard Thurman, October 30, 1943, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 3, 8.
[149]Alfred Fisk to Howard Thurman, October 15, 1943, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 3, 2.
[150]Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1959), 59.
[151]Alfred Fisk to Howard Thurman, October 30, 1943, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 3, 7.

Although Thurman had genuine interest in the work of the Fellowship Church, leaving Howard would not be easy because it would involve a huge challenge for Thurman and his family financially and socially. The prospective plummet in income—a full 50 percent of his Howard salary—loomed large for Thurman because he still had pressing financial obligations.[152] Thurman laid out the breadth of his financial need to Fisk as he discussed the possibility of coming to Fellowship Church:

> My financial responsibilities are so heavy that my income must of necessity be much higher than the figures indicated, as the situations now stands. I have a daughter who enters college in the fall; a semi-invalidic [*sic*] mother, for whom I am responsible; a second daughter who though ten years old, is gifted with music and much money has to be spent in her training in piano. . . .[153]

Nevertheless, in December, 1943, even in the face of major financial risk, Thurman decided to take part in the bold adventure that was Fellowship Church.

Choosing to leave Howard also meant Thurman would part company with Mordecai Johnson. Thurman's relationship with Johnson had become increasingly fraught since the India trip. Thurman asked Johnson once again for a paid sabbatical year, aiming to spend it in San Francisco at Fellowship Church. Yet again, Johnson refused stating, "You are not due for a sabbatical for some time. The university cannot make any of your salary available to you."[154] As Thurman remarked in *Footprints of a Dream*, Johnson appreciated Fellowship Church's efforts: "[Johnson] was a prophetic voice: indicting the Christian church because of its practice of segregation."[155] In July, 1944, as Thurman prepared to move to San Francisco without university funding and no idea about how he would support his family, Johnson questioned Thurman about

[152]From Howard Thurman to Alfred Fisk, November 12, 1943, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 3, 11-12.
[153]From Howard Thurman to Alfred Fisk, November 12, 1943, *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 3, 11-12.
[154]Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 31.
[155]Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 31.

the imminent dramatic loss of income: "How on earth can you support your family on two hundred dollars a month? How will you manage? How will you live?"[156] Thurman answered Johnson with an honest, unabashed statement of faith, "I don't know. All I know is, God will take care of us."[157]

Throughout Thurman's first three years at Fellowship Church he continued to be affiliated with Howard, retaining his position as Dean of Chapel and Professor of Religion though unpaid. Johnson disapproved of Thurman's bicoastal and trilateral professional status. In 1947, during an executive committee meeting with Thurman present, Johnson made a caustic, passive-aggressive remark aimed at Thurman whom Johnson thought was using Howard as a launching pad for his career move. "Howard University," he said, "was not to be 'used as a basis of operations.'"[158] Thurman unceremoniously resigned from Howard in the spring of 1947, likely causing a rift between him and Johnson as indicated by the precipitous decline in correspondence between them.

Notwithstanding the disharmony in Thurman's exit from Howard, his departure for Fellowship Church led to his most important work as a minister. At Fellowship Church, Thurman joined with others in displaying a "racial, [economic] and cultural heterogeneity."[159] By 1953, the church's racial make-up was "sixty percent Caucasian," "thirty-five percent Negro," and "five percent non-Negro."[160] These racial demographics were not accidental. In *Footprints of a Dream*, Thurman tells how he pushed the Fellowship Church to move out of the black section of San Francisco into a predominantly white section so that they could gain more white

[156]Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 31.
[157]Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 31.
[158] Rayford Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867-1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 379.
[159] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 109.
[160] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 109.

members. Thurman did not want Fellowship Church to serve the needs of the black community alone; rather he wanted to change America's racially segregated Sunday morning 11 o'clock hour.

Thurman's effort to tear down social boundaries went beyond race. Heavily influenced by his trip to India, Thurman aimed to create an environment of religious pluralism through experimentation in worship, study of sacred texts, and contemplative practice. The Fellowship Church's small room provided such a place by offering for contemplation the scriptures of the world's major religions, a statue of the Buddha, Hebrew prayer books, and a portrait of Gandhi that Thurman had painted himself. Fellowship Church's religious pluralism was further developed by the service structures Thurman crafted and the religious education it offered—such as its Sunday school, the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization Delegation, and adult education classes. In these moments, Thurman and his congregation pondered the different kinds of spirituality presented in the Torah, the Bible, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Qur'an, the Tripitaka and essays by theologians and philosophers, and other kinds of literature.

Although Fellowship Church aimed to be a racially integrated religious community, it kept its integrationist endeavors within its walls. Neither Thurman nor Fisk appeared eager for Fellowship Church to be a publicly activist church even as the city around him called for it. Famed black novelist and essayist James Baldwin offers a window into the tragic state of race relations in San Francisco only six years after Thurman moved to Boston to serve as the chaplain of Boston University. In his 1963 essay, Baldwin shone the spotlight on the persistence of racial discrimination on the assumed liberal oasis of San Francisco that turned out to be not so different from the South for black Americans. One of the men Baldwin interviewed said:

> They talk about the South. The South is not half as bad as San Francisco. You want me to tell you about San Francisco, I'll tell you about San Francisco. The white man, he's not taking advantage of you out in public like they do down in Birmingham[, Alabama]. But he's killing you with that pencil and paper, brother. When you go to look for a job, can you get a job?[161]

The documentary went on to show how blacks were caught in a vicious cycle of low paying temporary employment or dead end jobs that led them to live in city projects or become homeless. Several of the people featured explained how these problems, particularly black unemployment and underemployment, were more longstanding. Notably, the larger mainline black churches never politically engaged the state of affairs that blacks in San Francisco faced daily. Small store-front churches, often Pentecostal and nicknamed by detractors as "God Shops," gave black congregants "the only way of dealing with their day. Dealing with the landlord, the pawn broker, children, and the whole horrible complex of forces that bare you down every day."[162] These store-front churches simply gave black San Francisco residents, hope in the "here after" or a belief that God would save them. Thurman apparently never lifted his voice or pen to address blacks' conditions in San Francisco. Instead, Thurman's writings in this period take up challenging philosophical matters, racial segregation within American Christianity as a whole, and racism as a broader American problem.

Thurman's effort to build a church that welcomed all, regardless of race or even religion, was his attempt to overcome the barriers within American religious life. The exclusion of blacks from white churches was a practice Thurman had experienced and recognized from an early age. Such divisions were harder to overcome in the church than the racial exclusion of blacks in other aspects of American life. W. E. B. Du Bois made clear the depth of segregation in American

[161] James Baldwin, *Take This Hammer* (New York: WNET.ORG Properties LLC, 1963).
[162] Baldwin, *Take This Hammer.*

religious life in a 1946 article entitled "The Winds of Time: Coast Religious Groups." After visiting Fellowship Church in San Francisco and another intentionally integrated church in Los Angeles, Du Bois pondered the state of American churches:

> How does it happen that in a religion which above all other boasts of its catholicity, of the equality of rich and poor and of the one humanity united in Jesus Christ—How does it happen that this creed in America is almost never practiced? The whites give long distant [*sic*] treatment to the colored folk. . . . The colored people gather in their own church with their own organizations and look upon white religion as a sort of distant foreign land.[163]

Du Bois pointed to more than America's segregated Sunday 11 o'clock hour. He highlighted a Christian community that had been torn in two from its inception. He severely doubted the ability of Howard Thurman and integrated churches such as Fellowship Church to cure or heal the American Church's racial sickness. "I doubt," Du Bois wrote, "if the pioneer work in interracial churches on the West Coast is going to have much influence upon the East and the Christian church in general. . . ."[164] Indeed, Du Bois thought American segregation's final home would be the churches because they had too long been the bastions of American racism.

Du Bois's ideas about the American church's racial divide bring into full view the importance of Thurman's later work at Fellowship Church. Though it may have been politically frustrating for some, Fellowship Church attempted to become an example for other American churches of racial harmony and religious pluralism through its insular politics. Fellowship Church was Thurman's and his members' bold and careful attempt to nurse to life the American church, which was born, as Frederick Douglass put it, with the "slave auctioneer's bell and the

[163]W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Winds of Time: Coast Religious Groups," *The Chicago Defender*, June 8, 1946, 15.
[164]W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Winds of Time: Coast Religious Groups," *The Chicago Defender*, June 8, 1946, 15.

church-going bell [chiming]" with the same tone.[165] We ought to lament the fact that Howard Thurman's and Fellowship Church's integrative efforts have so rarely been imitated.

[165]Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (Auckland: the Floating Press, 1845), 168.

Epilogue: The Black Spiritual Left and the Religious Left's Unfinished Business of Race Relations

> *[There] is a spirit that makes for wholeness and for community; it finds its way into the quiet solitude of a Supreme Court justice when he ponders the constitutionality of an act of Congress which guarantees civil rights to all its citizens; it settles in the pools of light in the face of a little girl as with her frailty she challenges the hard frightened heart of a police chief; it walks along the lonely road with the solitary protest marcher and settles over him with a benediction as he falls by the assassin's bullet fired from ambush . . . it knows no country and its allies are to be found wherever the heart is kind and the collective will and the private endeavor seek to make justice where injustice abounds, to make peace where chaos is rampant, and to make the voice heard on behalf of the helpless and the weak.*[1]
>
> —Howard Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*

Howard Thurman's work toward racial justice and religious pluralism was part of a broader legacy of a black Spiritual Left that emerged in the 19th century and can still be found today. These people were the vanguard of various left-leaning movements for economic justice, women's rights, racial equality, and the current fight for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) rights. Like Thurman, many members of the black Spiritual Left found and created spaces for political work outside of black churches as they often pushed the racial boundaries of white progressive institutions. Today's generation of black activists, namely the Black Lives Matter Movement, has once again been forced to work outside of black churches as they struggle for racial justice and equality.

I define the black Spiritual Left as people who separated from or were not part of black churches and had a liberal spiritual orientation. They often found religious homes in non-black or multiracial, liberal religious circles that include religious folds and organizations such as the

[1]Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (Richmond: Friends United Press), 125-126.

Unitarian Universalist Church, the Society of Friends (Quakers), the Baha'i Faith, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and/or multi-racial denominationally and religiously pluralistic churches and communities. Notable is the early Frederick Douglass who read the Bible in light of ancient history, in effect interpreting the Bible in a proto-historical-critical way before he became an atheist. The abolitionist Sojourner Truth, who had Quaker roots during its liberal theological turn in the 19th century, also belonged to this spiritual left. Novelist Frances Harper (1825–1911), Bowie State College founder Rev. Don S. Goodloe (1878–1959), and journalist Fannie Barrier Williams (1855–1944) all belonged to the Unitarian church, the most theologically liberal denomination in the United States in the late 19th century.

By the first half of the 20th century, liberal religion had an even greater presence among African Americans, especially among the academic and intellectual elite who formed a second generation of the black Spiritual Left. As historian Barbara Savage argued, from the turn of the 20th century through the 1950s black scholars had serious doubts about the capacity of black churches for effecting social reform. Savage maintained that black intellectuals such as Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Benjamin Mays felt that most black churches were too preoccupied with the hereafter to be concerned about correcting injustices here and now. E. Franklin Frazier called black churches "the most important institutional barrier to integration and the assimilation of Negroes [in the United States]."[2] Perhaps because of these scholars' belief that black churches were disengaged and unwilling to engage with politics and social struggle, many of them migrated from the black churches of their birth to more liberal expressions of

[2] Barbara Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 112.

spirituality, some less explicitly Christian and others abandoning Christianity altogether. Further inquiry into black intellectuals' departure from institutional religion, particularly black communities of faith, would likely reveal a multiplicity of causes for their departure, not the least of which would be the insistence upon orthodox belief and morality at the exclusion of all else.

Indeed, the black Spiritual Left of the 1930s and 40s expanded not only among academic elites but also among leading black activists. Philosopher Alain Locke and the first black female lawyer H. Elsie Austin were adherents of the religiously broad Baha'i Faith. During this time, the Unitarian church was able to count among its clergy African Americans Lewis A. McGee and Eugene Sparrow, and the future NAACP president Whitney Young. Activist Bayard Rustin, a major figure in the FOR in the 1940s and later a chief strategist of the Civil Rights Movement, had grown up in the Quaker church.

Thurman's pursuit of religious life beyond black churches might have stemmed from the same impulses that stirred his academic colleagues and intellectual peers to seek spiritual sustenance and direction elsewhere. Unlike others of his cadre, Thurman did not abandon theological inquiry or witness. Instead, he developed and embodied a color-concerned liberal religiosity in academic spaces (the chapels of Spelman College, Howard University, and Boston University), liberal religious activist spaces (the FOR and Student Volunteer Movement), and the multi-racial Fellowship Church for All People which ultimately buttressed his black Spiritual Leftist commitment.

Thurman's life-long career as a chaplain and professor went beyond merely pushing America's political and religious bounds; it also provided him an opportunity to mentor and usher in a new generation of black Spiritual Leftists. Two protégés of Howard Thurman, civil rights activists James Farmer and Pauli Murray, personified this orientation in their efforts for

social justice. Tellingly, James Farmer and other members of CORE founded their New York chapter in a Harlem ashram, a Gandhi-inspired Hindu religious center. As Joseph Kip Kosek noted in *Acts of Conscience*, the FOR and then CORE members turned to the Harlem ashram because it was a way to transcend "'traditionally individualistic urban ways of living' and 'make pacifism a way of life.'"[3] Pauli Murray, a lawyer, activist, poet, and Episcopal priest, challenged the gender and racial norms of both the modern Civil Rights Movement and the Episcopal church. Murray pressed civil rights leaders to engage what she called "Jane Crow," the twin to Jim Crow that enshrined "the evil of discriminatory sex bias."[4] Murray also importuned the Episcopal church to improve its stance on racial and gender equality, stating, "the his-story of Episcopalianism in the United States reveals a consistent policy of subordination, not merely of Negroes . . . but also of women."[5] Murray went on to develop a resolution demanding that the Episcopal church "change in light of the Gospel of Christ and the values the Gospel promotes."[6]

Unfortunately, Howard Thurman's and his protégés' work to push the American religious left into a determined drive for the improvement of race relations never became a priority for white liberal religious leaders. Even with the ascendance of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other black clergy leaders in the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, race never became the primary concern for the majority of white religious liberals. In the 1970s and '80s when religious liberalism left the mainstream, matters worsened for black as the religious right

[3]Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 186.
[4]Mary Hawkesworth, *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016),388.
[5]Anthony Pinn, *Becoming "America's Problem Child": An Outline of Pauli Murray's Religious Life and Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 30.
[6]Pinn, *Becoming "America's Problem Child,"* 30.

rose to prominence with its thinly veiled racism under the leadership of neo-evangelical preachers and activists.

Ironically, as the days of white religious liberalism faded, the face of American liberal theology became increasingly black. The most prominent theological voice of the post-Reinhold Niebuhr era of the 1970s and 1980s was that of the systematic theologian James Cone of Union Theological Seminary. In his provocative book *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone called out white theologians who "would prefer to do theology without reference to color. . . ."[7] Cone highlighted how the liberal, so-called color-blind approach deeply embedded racism "in the thought forms of their culture" and crippled attempts to translate "the biblical emphasis on liberation to the black-white struggle today."[8]

Today, religious liberals—theologians, churches, and extra-ecclesiastical organizations—still have not taken racism seriously even as racial issues have come to the fore of American life with the all too frequent killings of black Americans by police officers and racist individuals. Unfortunately, most white theologians in the 21st century have not heeded the earlier call by Thurman and Cone for theologians to address race relations. No major contemporary white theologian—for example Stanley Hauerwas or Johnathan Milbank—has engaged Thurman's or Cone's race work, let alone made a major contribution in the fight against racism. Perhaps, like the generations of white theologians before them, they consider the issue of race less worthy of their pens. They often busy themselves with "more important issues" such as war and peace in international affairs, economic injustice apart from race, and internal matters affecting majority white churches—most recently controversy over homosexuality. How do these theologians plan

[7] James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1970), 68.
[8] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 68.

to guide the current generation of ministers who are leading congregations in a world groaning with the persistence of race prejudice and hatred?

White liberal religious organizations also failed to engage race as a theological problem. Faith in Public Life and the Center for American Progress's Religion and Values Initiative have yet to take up the task by issuing statements or developing programs that address race conflict. The weight of these organizations' efforts is brought to bear on other important matters such as women's reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, gun violence, and economic inequality. They miss, however, the fact that these issues affect blacks and their communities in ways that are different from whites and their communities because of racism. White liberal religious organizations are needed in the struggle for black freedom because they have power when lobbying government officials and mobilizing other progressive factions in ways that black organizations, such as the NAACP and the National Urban League, do not.

Some liberal white clergy leaders—notably Rev. Erica Richmond of the Unitarian Society of New Haven, Connecticut, Rev. Renita Lamkin of St. Johns African Methodist Episcopal Church in St. Charles, Missouri, Rev. Ashley Harness of Lyndale United Church of Christ in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, and Rev. Jeff Hood of Hope and Justice in Dallas, Texas—have taken part in the current fight for racial equality that has emerged from the recent race-inspired murders of black people. Sadly, most white mainline Protestant churches have not participated in the protests by the Black Lives Matter movement that opposes violence against blacks. What James Baldwin said when speaking about the "white protestant Christian majority" in America during the 1960s is regrettably true today: "they have exhibited a really staggering

level of irresponsibility and immoral washing of the hands [when it comes to black issues]."[9] If white liberal churches took part in the current movement for racial progress, it would be a monumental step in the fight for racial justice, creating a necessary counterculture to the Evangelical movement that has backed Donald Trump's racist and demagogic presidential campaign. For this to happen, white religious liberals must abandon their "color blindness" and become "color conscious." They have much to learn theologically and personally from the early work of Howard Thurman.

In contrast, black churches have had a complicated relationship with color consciousness and the life of faith. Today, this is manifest in the churches' relation to the Black Lives Matter movement. While most black church leaders agree with the impulses of Black Lives Matter—particularly the call for black citizens to enjoy justice and equality—the movement has challenged the conservative nature of many black churches. The fact that Black Lives Matter was founded and generated by queer black people pushes against the grain of many black churches and denominations that have long condemned and rejected its LGBTQ sons and daughters. As a result, Black Lives Matter activists have had to press black conservative pastors to join the movement despite discomfort with the LGBTQ community.

The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013 by three black women—Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors—after the acquittal of George Zimmerman who stood trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager in Samford, Florida.[10] In a Facebook post entitled "A Love Note to Black People" following Zimmerman's acquittal, Garza

[9]James Baldwin's conversation with Reinhold Niebuhr, "Meaning of the Birmingham Tragedy," Reinhold Niebuhr Audio Tape Collection, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia.
[10]"About the Black Lives Matter Network," http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/, accessed July 19, 2016

implored activists to "get active," "get organized," and to "fight back" against racism.[11] Garza ended the post by stating, "Our lives matter, black lives matter." Cullors replied to the post with the now famous hashtag "#blacklivesmatter."[12] The Black Lives Matter hashtag is a bold statement to the world that in spite of the violent acts, inequalities, and overall hatred faced by black people, their lives still matter and their rights should be upheld. Indeed, the Black Lives Matter hashtag highlights the widespread race-based inequality of America where, as the religious scholar Eddie Glaude wrote, there is an unsubtle "belief that white people are more valued than others."[13]

Disturbingly, the Black Lives Matter slogan has often become a point of contention among so-called color-blind, right-wing people who are also racist. Repeatedly, such people as United States Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina will counter the declaration "Black Lives Matter" with the slogan "All Lives Matter."[14] At outset, the All Lives Matter slogan would assumingly include Black Lives. However, the All Lives Matter slogan dismisses the grim circumstances that many blacks face daily: glaring inequality, lack of fair access to resources, living under the constant threat of death at the hands of the state or vigilantes. The Black Lives Matter versus All Lives Matter controversy eerily reminds one of Thurman's essay "Let Ministers Be Christian!" in which he warned about the dangers of whites ignoring black suffering and instead dwelling "on glittering generalities about loving all men."[15] Thurman and the Black Lives Matter activists remind us that the United States cannot achieve its universal

[11]Herbert Ruffin, "Black Lives Matter: The Growth of a New Social Justice Movement," www.blackpast.org/perspectives/black-lives-matter-growth-new-social-justice-movement, accessed July 18, 2016
[12] Herbert Ruffin, "Black Lives Matter: The Growth of a New Social Justice Movement," www.blackpast.org/perspectives/black-lives-matter-growth-new-social-justice-movement.
[13]Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2016), 6.
[14]Eugene Scott, "Tim Scott defends use of 'all lives matter,'" September 3, 2015, CNN.
[15] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 46.

democratic ideals until it addresses the particular realities of those black lives that have often been marginalized.

On August 9, 2014, Black Lives Matter had its first mass demonstration when activists from across the nation gathered in Ferguson, Missouri, to protest the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by police officer Darren Wilson, a white man. The Ferguson demonstration—which was mostly peaceful—attracted wide media coverage as did the racism of the Ferguson police department and justice system that made it exceedingly difficult for many black people in the area to get out from under the disproportional arrest and jailing of blacks for minor traffic tickets they could not afford to pay. Though Black Lives Matter is primarily known for its stance against police violence, the movement has also sought to push for black people's freedom and equality. On their website, the Black Lives Matter movement declares:

> Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.[16]

Certainly, the Black Lives Matter movement has defined itself as a counter culture to the patriarchy that has pervaded black churches, colleges, and civic groups in the centuries-old struggle for black freedom and equality. Often poor blacks, black women, and LGBTQ blacks were marginalized in the civil rights movements of the past, e.g., Bayard Rustin (gay) and Pauli

[16]"About the Black Lives Matter Network," http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/

Murray (female and gay), or in the case of black women, defined only as foot soldiers to black men.

Black Lives Matter's countercultural sensibilities reflect the outlook of its founders who identify sexually as queer. Two of these women have defined themselves against the archetypical religious black leader who embraces traditional white Protestantism. Tometi describes herself in the liberal religious vein, finding "solace and guidance from her spiritual life" and being "[a] believer and practitioner of liberation theology. . . ."[17] Although Tometi does not claim any particular religious affiliation, she says that "spirituality informs her life and human rights work." She adds that "justice is a spiritual practice."[18] Cullors, raised as a Jehovah's Witness, now a practices Ifà, a religion indigenous to Nigeria.[19] Spirituality that issues forth in justice stands at the heart of her involvement in Black Lives Matter. She confesses, "I don't believe spirit is this thing that lives outside of us dictating our lives, but rather our ability to be deeply connected to something that is bigger than us. I think that is what makes our work powerful."[20]

The eclectic spirituality of the Black Lives Matter founders appears to have created an open space for a wide variety of spiritual expression within the movement's ranks. In "The Role of Spirit in the #Black Lives Matter Movement," Hebah Farrag described a dramatic scene in which Black Lives Matter protesters used their religious rituals in their protest outside the home

[17] Opal Tometi, "Justice+Spirituality," http://opaltometi.com/spirituality/, accessed July 19, 2016
[18] Tometi, "Justice+Spirituality," http://opaltometi.com/spirituality/
[19] Hebah Farrag, "The Role of Spirit in the #BLACKLIVESMATTER Movement: A Conversation with Activist and Artist Patrisse Cullors," *Religion Dispatches*, religiondispatches.org/the-role-of-spirit-in-the-blacklivesmatter-movement-a-conversation-with-activist-and-artist-patrisse-cullors/.
[20] Farrag, "The Role of Spirit in the #BLACKLIVESMATTER Movement: A Conversation with Activist and Artist Patrisse Cullors."

of Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti.[21] Farrag saw "a white-clad black woman burning sage across a militarized police line. Altars using sacred images and symbols from multiple faiths placed to hold space for those murdered. [And the] [e]vents ending with prayers for the oppressed."[22]

The open, diverse, and vivacious spirituality of the Black Lives Matter movement extends beyond Christianity and black churches. As Ferguson protester Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou explained:

> If you look at Ferguson or Baltimore, most of the organizations that have emerged are new formations: Millennial Activists United, Hands Up United, Lost Voices, the Don't Shoot Coalition. They have had no space inside a church, in the NAACP, or in the Urban League.[23]

For Sekou, these groups challenge many black churches' "religious respectability and sensibility."[24] He points out that these protesters are the very people that most black churches—or better put, churches in general—have pushed to its margins: "black women, queer women, single mothers, poor black boys with records, kids with tattoos on their faces who sag their pants."[25]

Protesters' social marginality even within black communities has put them publicly at odds with well-established homophobic black pastors. Recently, Jamal Bryant, a homophobic, prosperity gospel preacher, civil rights leader, and pastor of Empowerment Temple in Baltimore,

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[21] Farrag, "The Role of Spirit in the #BLACKLIVESMATTER Movement: A Conversation with Activist and Artist Patrisse Cullors."
[22] Farrag, "The Role of Spirit in the #BLACKLIVESMATTER Movement: A Conversation with Activist and Artist Patrisse Cullors."
[23] Sarah van Gelder, "Rev. Sekou on Today's Civil Rights Leaders: 'I Take My Orders From 23-Year-Old Queer Women,'" www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/black-lives-matter-s-favorite-minister-reverend-sekou-young-queer.
[24] Gelder, "Rev. Sekou on Today's Civil Rights Leaders."
[25] Gelder, "Rev. Sekou on Today's Civil Rights Leaders."

Maryland, met the righteous discontent of Black Lives Matter protesters. In June, 2014, Bryant delivered the misogynistic sermon, "I'm My Enemies [*sic*] Worst Nightmare," in which he lamented the idea of churches becoming feminized spaces that black men no longer desired to attend.[26] Bryant stated that there were no longer real men in the church; rather there were only "sanctified sissies."[27] Two years earlier, Bryant had been a major voice of the black clergy in Baltimore who opposed a bill that, despite his efforts, legalized same-sex marriage in Maryland.[28] Leaders of the Black Lives Matter chapter in Tampa, Florida, did not forget Bryant's comments when he was chosen in January, 2016, to be a keynote speaker for a local Martin Luther King Leadership Awards Breakfast. In a letter to the *Tampa Bay Times*, they said that although they appreciated his work against police brutality, they intensely deplored his religiously-based homophobia. "Rev. Bryant has made it impossible," they wrote, "for organizations to provide him a podium without also legitimizing his indefensible rhetoric."[29] Later in the letter, Black Lives Matter activists made it apparent that black LGBTQ communities would not be shoved aside: "You cannot truly align with the message that Black Lives Matter while simultaneously making the world more hostile and dangerous for LGBT black people."[30]

Like the generation of black intellectuals and activists of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, black millennial activists have left black churches to find and form sacred spaces for justice-seeking spirituality. Rather than finding their spiritual home in the denominations and such churches'

[26] Jamal Bryant, "I'm My Enemies Worst Nightmare," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DcT_0H2EnQ, accessed July 19, 2016
[27] Bryant, "I'm My Enemies Worst Nightmare," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DcT_0H2EnQ, accessed
[28] Bryant, "Pastor Jamal Bryant 'Jilted' By Obama, But Still Believes in President," *News One*, newsone.com/2014953/pastor-jamal-bryant-supports-obama/
[29] Charlie Frago, "Activists Release Letter Calling for Bryant's Invitation to MLK Event be Rescinded," *Tampa Bay Times*, January 7, 2016, www.tampabay.com/blogs/baybuzz/activists-release-letter-calling-for-bryants-invitation-to-mlk-event-be/2260419
[30] Frago, "Activists Release Letter Calling for Bryant's Invitation to MLK Event be Rescinded."

sanctuaries, their spiritual home is in the streets, on social media, and in one another's houses. Sekou might be right when he says that for millennials of the Black Lives Matter movement the "idea of the Church, with a big C . . . is obsolete. . . . The church needs to get saved."[31]

The churches might do well to harken back to Thurman's pluralistic and democratic vision for the American church and American society as a whole. Thurman said that Christians ought to "meet people where they are and treat them as if they were where they ought to be."[32] More black church members need to meet the Black Lives Matter movement and other millennial activists in the streets with open hearts filled with love and compassion. Meeting these activists where they are could move black churches to embody Thurman's mystical vision for a world in which it is true that where "thou hast seen thy [neighbor], thou hast seen thy God."[33]

Black churches must work for this common vision because times are too dark for division. Over the past three years, black America has had to contend with the status quo of systematic racism and state-enforced violence upon black peopled. Black Americans have been forced to watch the nation's repeated miscarriages of justice as they see on film innocent blacks killed by police on nearly a monthly, if not weekly, basis. The victims of these crimes are put on trial in the court of public opinion. The selling of compact discs and loose cigarettes, and the shoplifting of $1.25 cigarillos too often have become the rocks public relations teams throw to hide the blood on police officers' hands. Black cries for justice are met with military-level weaponry—sometimes surplus material from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As the people watch their televisions, it is often if they are watching *Eyes on the Prize* all over again, but now

[31] Gelder, "Rev. Sekou on Today's Civil Rights Leaders: 'I Take My Orders From 23-Year-Old Queer Women'"
[32] "Good News for the Underprivileged," *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume 1: My People Need Me* (Walter E. Fluker, ed.), (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 269.
[33] *Thurman Papers*, Vol. 1, 269.

in high definition. Mostly peaceful protests have been met with rubber bullets, tanks, and smoke canisters. Meanwhile, too many of the law-enforcement murderers of black women and men are not jailed, sometimes not even indicted, and when tried are acquitted.

Indeed, these times call for black Americans to reimagine their faith and attempt to refashion the truths of their religious and political commitments for themselves *as black people*. The black Spiritual Left has found, and continues to find, ways to square their faith with modernity as they have courageously fought for the goals of racial justice and equality. Again and again, they reevaluate their politics, and reassess their faith, in order to speak with veracity to the particulars of their moments. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the earlier American religious liberals, they have refused to "grope among dry bones of the past" for their faith.[34] In these dyer times, more black religious communities must follow the black Spiritual Left's example, realizing with Rufus Jones that "most of our tragic separations and misunderstandings, our heresies and our orthodoxies are due not to religious experience, but to [dogmas or] rationalizations."[35] In the words of Howard Thurman, we must listen to the sound of the genuine within ourselves or our faith will ever live on the strings that someone else would pull.[36]

[34] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: Public Domain Books, Kindle Edition, 1849)
[35] Rufus Jones, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Diaries 1875-1948 (Box 61-63), Quaker Special Collections, Haverford College
[36]Howard Thurman, (Jo Moore Stewart, ed.), "Baccalaureate Address at Spelman College," May 4, 1980, *The Spelman Messenger,* Vol. 96, No. 4 (Summer 1980), 3.