

PAUL HARVEY Q&A

Paul Harvey is Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Colorado, and the author/editor of numerous works on race and religion in American history. He is currently at work on a biography of Howard Thurman for the Eerdman's "Religious Lives" Biography series.

1. What is it about Howard Thurman that makes him relevant to us today? Are there ways in which he and his work speak directly to the culture we find ourselves in now in America? The world?

Howard Thurman grew up in a very specific tradition in the rural South, and managed over the course of his life to speak to a world audience. He somehow managed the difficult balance of being rooted in places and institutions and being a figure who pursued unity. He speaks more than ever to us today in an era of growing tribalism, acrimony, racism, and misunderstanding. He lived through all of those, and overcame them to be a figure of universal importance.

2. How do you assess Thurman's impact on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s?

I would call him a mentor of the movement. He was not a movement man, an organization man (he said that exactly about himself, in fact). And thus he was not an activist in the conventional sense. Yet he was a figure admired and beloved by activists, precisely for what he taught them. And thus, as one person has put it, Thurman was not out with his body on the front lines, but he made it possible for people out on the front lines to understand philosophically what they were doing and why there were doing it.

3. What was the nature of the relationship between Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.? What was Howard Thurman's role in that relationship?

Thurman was modest about his own role, saying at one point that he was one of the few professors at Boston University (where he overlapped briefly with King during King's years as a student there) who exercised no influence on King *as* a professor. At one point, asked to recommend a young man for a particular post, Thurman mentioned King but passed over him to recommend someone else instead, in part because he didn't know him personally. But in fact Thurman exercised a significant influence on King's thought, particularly through his work *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and enough of an influence that King copied significant words and phrases from Thurman in some of his speeches. As the story goes, King carried around Thurman's book in his coat pocket during the Montgomery bus boycott. I suspect that's not literally true, but is symbolically significant and true in that sense. And when King was stabbed and nearly murdered by a deranged woman in 1958, Thurman paid him a hospital visit that resulted in a period of rest and contemplation for King, such as he never experienced again for the rest of his life. I have written about that more [here](#).

4. (Relatedly) You have talked about the connection between Thurman's mysticism and King's activism - that King was the "man in motion" and Thurman the "man who was still." What does

this say about their respective approaches to the struggle for civil rights and the role that religion could play in that struggle?

I have answered that partly in #2 above, but here I would just add that Thurman always emphasized the role of introspection, self-examination, and personal spirituality to prepare oneself for larger social struggles. For him, personal and social transformation were intimately connected, and it's for that reason in part I think of him as a mentor of the movement.

5. You've also mentioned that Thurman was a man ahead of his time, that his religious thinking really anticipated the direction spirituality in America would take in the twenty-first century. In what ways was Thurman's thinking different from that around him in mid-twentieth century America, and how does he anticipate new directions religious thought and practice would take in the decades to come?

Thurman was a religious seeker, his entire life. Obviously there is a long history of religious seekers in the United States, a story told by Leigh Schmidt and other scholars, but to that Thurman brought a particular global perspective. As well, Thurman's role in creating and heading for nine years the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco put him at the forefront of struggles against racism and on behalf of human unity within religious institutions that were almost completely racially separated. In a sense, the contemporary quests of those who are "spiritual but not religious," who want to access diverse spiritual traditions but not be encumbered by specific religious institutions that demand a sacrifice of fundamental principles, were forecast in Thurman's lifelong quests. As well, for all those who seek grounding both in spiritual practices and social activism, Thurman provides a model of how to marry impulses that have tended to be separated in more recent American history.

6. How does Thurman fit into black theology in America, particularly black liberation theology. Is he a forerunner of these movements, apart from them, or something else altogether?

I would not call Thurman a black theologian in the sense that someone like James Cone was, because Thurman simply had different aims and ends in mind. And indeed, Thurman usually refused to speak about "race" topics to white audiences, because he did not want to be slotted into such a role. On the other hand, many of Thurman's works are, in fact, statements that fully accord with the later themes of black theology, most especially the portrayal of Jesus in *Jesus and the Disinherited*. So I would call him a precursor to the rise of black theology in the 1960s and forward, even though he would not want to be categorized exactly as such. The title of his last book *In Search of Common Ground*, better typifies his lifelong quest.

7. Why do you think Thurman isn't as well known today as some of his contemporaries or than people he mentored such as Martin Luther King, Jr.? Should he be better known?

Thurman should definitely be better known, and he will be thanks to this film, some forthcoming biographies, and most importantly because of the magnificent scholarly work over the last few decades of Walter Fluker, Luther Smith, Peter Eisenstadt, and others involved in the Howard Thurman Papers project. He certainly will never be as well known as someone such as King, nor would he want to be (or assume he should be), because Thurman was basically a private man and

an intellectual, not a public persona in the mode of King or others who came after such as Jesse Jackson. But as we deepen our understanding of black religious history, the civil rights movement, and philosophies of human unity, Thurman will rise in significance, as the thinker who presaged so much of what was to come. He will never be an intellectual celebrity, but over time he will be more fully understood as someone who moved American religion in fundamentally new directions, and did so without seeking to create movements or institutions. He did so simply through the eloquence of his ideas, the force of his personality, and the strength of his sermons and writings.