

Seeing the Universalist Perspective in Howard Thurman
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In *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta*, Swami Prabhavananda states that his religion of Vedanta, derived from the Hindu scriptures called the Vedas, teaches that “all religions are true inasmuch as they lead to one and the same goal—God realization.” Thus Vedanta “accepts and reveres all the great prophets, spiritual teachers, and aspects of the Godhead worshipped in different faiths, considering them to be manifestation of one underlying truth.” He further asserts the character and beliefs of the founder of his religious order, Sri Ramakrishna, as one of the illumined saints who expressed in his lifetime “to a greater degree than any other teacher the idea of religious universality and harmony. Not only did he undergo the disciplines of divergent sects within Hinduism but those of Mohammedanism and Christianity as well. Through each religious path he achieved the supreme realization of God, and thus was able to proclaim with the authority of direct experience: ‘So many religions, so many paths to reach one and the same goal.’”ⁱ

Universal religious perspectives have been embraced and experienced by other religious practitioners, functionaries, leaders, scholars, thinkers such as Mohandas Gandhi, Thomas Merton, Howard Thurman, and others of various religious backgrounds. Howard Thurman, for instance, who engaged in a life-long quest for religious understanding, for God-reality, was able to determine from his experiences of every religious expression from the so-called developed religions to the indigenous religions of Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Americas that “truth is found in every religion, and it is not true because it is found in those religions, but it is found in those religions because it is true.”ⁱⁱ It is significant that Thurman’s religious quest as an African American involved many struggles against the odds of religious, social, and economic oppression which he was able to transcend. His understanding of God was drawn from his unique religious struggles, from which “he was able to envision not a universal religion but a universal religious and human perspective that lends crucial meaning to the whole of human life.”ⁱⁱⁱ He states in summary: “God bottoms existence; therefore, the deeper down I go, the more into Him I find myself. None of the categories of classifications—of faith, belief, etc.—have any standing in the presence of this transcendent experience, because I think that whether I’m Black, White, Presbyterian, Baptist, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, that in the presence of God, all these categories by which we relate to each other fade away and have no significance whatsoever. For in his presence I am a part of Him being revealed to Him.”^{iv}

Howard Thurman was speaking out of the wisdom and insight of a vision he had received from long years of experience and spiritual searching as a life-long practicing mystic. Probably the average person never arrives at this point or height in her or his religious understanding. But we all in our genuine religious experience do begin at the same place Thurman and other great

spiritual giants begin—and that is the point of personal religious encounter with Spirit. And the most vital and gratifying spiritual encounter is had by the person when he or she is able to bring to the encounter all that she or he is, including one's familial, racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, social class traits or identity. Consequently, experience has shown that where people are stripped of much of their identities and attempts are made to introduce to them elements of identities foreign to them, as was done in colonial societies in places such as Africa and the Americas, human and social abrasions or damages occur that must be fixed at some point in the historical process. We have seen that in the New World including the Caribbean, South, and Central America (other places, as well, of course), processes have occurred whereby conquered peoples have resisted dehumanization and destruction of their identities by holding on to them, even in disguised ways, as well as by recovering or restoring them in cases where they were for the most part divested of them.

In light of our present dilemmas, what shall we do with Howard Thurman in this twenty-first century? He was born near the close of the nineteenth century. He lived through most of the twentieth century. But my contention is that his life and thought belong to the twenty-first century and beyond. At a seminar held at the World Methodist Council in Brighton, England, July, 2001, titled "Spirituality and the 21st Century," Steve Harper pointed to the significant difference between 1901 and 2001 as having to do with the question today of, "How do I live my faith and share my faith with my neighbor, that is, people from all over the world?" A significant concern today may be whether to read the Bible or surf the Internet, etc., he asserted, noting the vast technological divide between the two eras. He suggested that perhaps we don't begin at any of those points but, rather, with the human heart. For despite all our differences we all share one thing—hunger in the heart for God. He characterized us in this century as seeking to satisfy that hunger in some way, and suggested that our hunger for God today will define our spirituality. He returned us to the often-quoted Augustinian phrase, "We are restless until we rest in God." In our attempt to find ourselves in that journey of faith, Harper stated that the Church needs some visionaries like Leonard Sweet (*Post-Modern Pilgrims*, Nashville: Broadman-Holman Press, 2000). Interestingly enough, Leonard Sweet and I were both at Colgate Rochester Divinity School at the same time in the 1970's, the nurturing ground of Howard Thurman and where Thurman came during our student days to deliver the Walter Rauschenbusch Lecture. Leonard Sweet probably had some Thurmanic influence on his way to becoming prophetic genius of the super technological age.

Almost three decades ago, I had the privilege of hosting and directing a Howard Thurman Convocation at the University of South Florida, with the help of my Department, Religious Studies, and a number of other components of the University. The theme of that three-day Convocation was "The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom"; the proceedings were published by Peter Lang Publishers in a volume by that title. A number of

well-known scholars and critics were participants, including Charles H. Long, James H. Cone, Lerone Bennett, Jr., Alton Pollard, III, Luther E. Smith, Walter L. Fluker, and others. The third and final section of the conference focused on Thurman and contemporary quests for freedom, “Insights for the Future of Human Life.” Of course, we had in mind the coming new millennium upon which we are presently embarked.

Those years, 1990 to the present, seem like a vast stretch of time really. So much has transpired since then, so many journeys and quests on the parts of those who were participants and others of us: for that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? Journeying, questing? Those whom Thurman affected with his mystic dynamism, his infectious enthusiasm for life’s pathway, they were and are known to embark on their own particular journeys. So in that vast stretch of years much has caught the dreams and fancy and led many in various directions. St. Sue, that is, Sue Bailey Thurman, who was our honored guest and interpreter at that convocation, St. Sue took the final steps of her journey on this side and crossed over and graced the other side with the charm and beauty of her spirit.

Those who have continued journeying on this side have pursued ways of becoming of greater use and benefit to the natural, human, and spiritual enterprise. We have written creative and scholarly articles and books. We have designed and taught courses coming out of our deepest commitments and life goals. We have shifted and/or expanded our academic and religious positions to where we could do the greatest good and realize our best potentials. We have traveled nationally and internationally and broadened and deepened our relations and commitments to the human project. And the Howard Thurman Educational Trust and Papers Project have done quite a bit of shifting, as well, thanks to the innovativeness and efforts of Walter Fluker and the generous favors and grants of educational institutions and foundations.

So the time span has seemed vast, for the changes and transitions have been great and phenomenal, not the least of which and the most astonishing and revealing of which has been and is September 11, 2001—the world’s Millennial Mesmerism.

How many of us have had to fall back upon sources in our lives like Thurman in order to recover balance and sanity from that staggering moment in time? One source that strikes me is from Thurman’s book *The Search for Common Ground* (Harper and Row, 1971):

In the conflicts between man and man, between group and group, nation and nation, the loneliness of the seeker for community is sometimes unendurable.... There is a spirit in man and in the world working always against the thing that destroys and lays waste. Always he must know that the contradictions of life are not final or ultimate; he must distinguish between failure and a many-sided awareness so that he will not mistake conformity for harmony, uniformity for synthesis. He will know that for all men

to be alike is the death of life in man, and yet perceive
the harmony that transcends all diversity and in which
diversity finds its richness and significance (p. 6).

These insights land us right where we are in our millennial quagmire. These words ring true, yet we must ponder these things over and over in our minds.

John Cartwright in his “Howard Thurman: Insights for the Future of Human Life and Wholeness” (*Human Search*, pp. 165-190) and Darrell Fasching in his “Howard Thurman: Holy Man for the Coming Millennium” (*Human Search*, pp. 191-203). each look closely at Thurman within the perspective of religious and social ethics. Cartwright focuses on Thurman’s dream of the unity of all life and pursues it to its ultimate significance for the personal and social salvation of the world. He states, “His dream transcends time and continues to grow and develop as we and others continue to explore his thought and find ever more creative dimensions” (p.165). Cartwright stresses Thurman’s timeless pursuit of common ground, seeking to “break through the barriers that separate the human family—barriers that create suspicion, hatred, violence and death.” In the process, Cartwright notes, Thurman led men and women to the God within, where they too could discover, as he himself did, the miracle of the religious life in the emerging awareness “that all levels of discord are related to and answerable by the one experience of unity, the experience of God” (*Ibid.*). We might note what Thurman meant by “God.” His meaning approximates Eckhart’s designation “God beyond God.” It is not the God of any particular religious tradition as such; it is beyond all saying and naming. As Thurman says, God bottoms existence, and that is where the unity is found.

Cartwright is supported in this interpretations by Thurman’s own words on the film, *Conversations with Howard Thurman* (Landrum Bolling, Host, 1978):

The deeper down I go, the more into Him I find myself. None of the categories of classifications—of faith, belief, etc.—have any standing in the presence of this transcendent experience, because I think that whether I’m Black, White, Presbyterian, Baptist, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, that in the presence of God, all these categories by which we relate to each other fade away and have no significance whatsoever. For in his presence
I am a part of Him being revealed to Him.

Cartwright elaborates on the moral and ethical significance and application of this discovery and dream of Thurman, as relates to the natural environment as well as the society of humans. The quest for community lies at the heart of the search for common ground. And the community

is both natural and human. “If community is to be established, love must be the prevailing ethos of relationships. Unity-in-love is characterized by its ability to allow both persons and nature to realize their potential” (pp. 172-173). This community ideal of Thurman is to be realized historically, not in a far off paradise. :”It can be both an inner individual experience of becoming aware within oneself of the reality and oneness of life, as well as an interpersonal and intergroup outward reality of isolated and apathetic lives transformed into related and caring ones. Community, finally, is the only destiny that can bring fulfillment to the creative spirit that permeates the whole world” (p. 175).

See <https://www.amazon.com/Human-Search-Proceedings-Convocation-Development/dp/0820414662>;

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1. 1. Swami Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta* (New York: New American Library, 1963), pp. xi, xiii.
 2. 2.. *Conversations with Howard Thurman*, Part 2. Videocassette hosted by Landrum Bolling (San Francisco: The Howard Thurman Educational Trust, 1978).
 3. Mozella G. Mitchell, “Religion and the Discovery of Self: Howard Thurman and the Tributaries of the Deep River,” in *The Religion Factor: An Introduction to How Religion Matters*, pp. 84-95, edited by William S. Green and Jacob Neusner (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 86.
 4. *Conversations with Howard Thurman*, Part 2.