

From ***Against the Hounds of Hell:***

A Biography of Howard Thurman

by Peter Eisenstadt

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Thurman's gendered language is left as in the original.

On 21 February, 1936, Howard Thurman, his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, and Edward Carroll arose around midnight from their hostel in Bombay. They comprised three-fourths of the Negro Delegation sent by the American Student Christian Federation on a "Pilgrimage of Friendship" to their Indian counterparts. (The fourth member of the Delegation, Edward Carroll's wife, Phenola Carroll, was indisposed.)¹ By 21 February the Delegation had been on an extended speaking tour of British colonies in South Asia for four months.² This night was special. After getting ready, Howard, Sue, and Edward Carroll boarded a train. About 4 hours later, they arrived at Navsari Station, about 200 miles north of the city. They were met by Mahadev Desai, Mahatma (Mohandas) Gandhi's longtime personal secretary. While Sue and Edward Carroll rested in a bungalow, Thurman chatted with Desai. At dawn they got into Desai's battered Model T Ford for the 20-mile drive over a badly rutted dust road to Dharampur in the native state of Bardoli, where the Congress Party had a compound. Howard, Sue, and Edward Carroll would shortly become the first African Americans to meet with Gandhi, the world-famous leader of the Indian independence movement.³

It was an historic meeting. At first Gandhi peppered the delegation with questions about the situation of African Americans. "Never in my life," Thurman would later write, "have I been

a part of that kind of examination: persistent, pragmatic questions about American Negroes, about the course of slavery, and how we survived it.”⁴ Gandhi asked questions about voting rights, lynching, discrimination, public school education, and the churches.

After a while, it was the chance of the delegation to ask questions of Gandhi. Many of the questions tried to get a better understanding of his notion of nonviolence. He told the delegation that he never liked the term non-violence because “the negative particle ‘non.’” He told the delegation But he said, “it is no negative force” but is rather “the greatest and the activist force in nature,” a translation of the Jainist concept of ahimsa, respect for all living things, Gandhi’s Sanskrit term for the concept. (“Satyagraha” is giving ahimsa a concrete political task to accomplish.) “Superficially,” he told Thurman and the others, we are “surrounded by life and bloodshed, life living upon life,” but ahimsa is the deeper and truer reality, “a force which is more positive than electricity and more powerful than the ether.” When Thurman asked if non-violence “overrides all other forces” Gandhi replied “yes, it is the only true force in life.” Non-violence or ahimsa, for Gandhi was less an idea than a combined physical and moral reality. (Perhaps George Lucas, a student of Eastern religion, was thinking of something similar when he made “the force” the substrate of the Star Wars universe—though Lucas forgot about the nonviolence part.

Ahimsa is a very difficult doctrine. Sue Bailey Thurman asked “How am I to act, supposing my own brother was lynched before my eyes?” As for the lynchers, Gandhi replied “I must not wish ill to these, but neither must I not co-operate with them.” If your livelihood is in any way dependent on the community of lynchers, one must find alternative means of

support, refusing “even to touch food that comes from them, and I refuse to co-operate with even my brother Negroes who tolerate the wrong.” Thurman would call this in 1938 the shock treatment, trying “to tear men free of their alignments in the kingdom of evil,” freeing them by giving them “a sense of acute insecurity,” through “organizing a boycott, by organizing non-cooperation, by engineering non-violent strikes.”⁵ Gandhi and Thurman and the delegation discussed this for a while, and if Thurman and the others did not accept Gandhi’s teachings in all of its harshness, they agreed with him that if a cause is worth fighting for, it must ultimately be worth dying for. Thurman told Gandhi that “the Negroes were ready to accept the message” of nonviolence. Gandhi, replied, in his closing comment, “if it comes true it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world.”

Thurman was a pacifist for over a decade before he met Gandhi, and he was a leader of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the leading Christian pacifist organization. If he was never an activist, in the usual sense of the term, he did his best to put forward a distinctive African American version of Gandhian nonviolence in the 1930s and 1940s, and make Gandhi’s prophecy a reality. This culminated in his best known and probably his most important book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949.)⁶ He had originally wanted to call the book “The Hounds of Hell” but his publishers thought it sounded too much like a Sherlock Holmes mystery. In some ways it was a better title. Throughout *Jesus and the Disinherited*, if the religion of Jesus is the answer, the hounds of hell are the problem. “Whenever his [Jesus] spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.”⁷

In the central three chapters of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman discusses the three “hounds of hell”: fear, deception, and hatred, and how the religion of Jesus can keep them at bay. Fear he argues is a safety device, like pain, telling an individual what not to do, and where not to go. But when fear becomes a basis for avoiding confrontation, all potentially negative encounters with hostile authority, then “fear, which served originally as a protective mechanism for the weak, finally becomes death for the self. “ For Thurman, deception is “perhaps the oldest of all the techniques by which the weak have protected themselves against the strong.”⁸ Often deception of white folks was the only way to get by, and blacks knew as a matter of course never to disclose their true feelings to whites, and insincerity became engrained in black-white relations, a root of so-called “southern politeness.” But for Thurman, deception as a way of life carries with it a very stiff price. “A man who habitually lies becomes a lie, and it is increasingly impossible for him to know when he is lying and when he is not . . . the penalty of deception is to become a deception.”⁹ Obstacles are never confronted, and never removed. At best, you circuitously make your way around them.

Hate is the third of Thurman’s hounds of hell. For the disinherited, hatred is a “device by which an individual seeks to protect himself against moral disintegration” establishing “a dimension of self-realization hammered out of the raw materials of injustice.”¹⁰ It too has a role as a survival technique, but its utility is very limited. It is “blind and nondiscriminating,” liable to be discharged inappropriately. But its biggest damage was to the hater. One cannot sustain the initial “white heat” of hatred, and if it originally seemed “positive and dynamic” in the end turns all to ash, destroying the resources of the hater. Hatred “tends to dry up the springs of creative thought in the life of the hater,” who focuses on the “negative

aspects of his environment” while the object of his hate, unvanquished and even more inescapable, grows stronger. Hatred starves “the urgent need of the personality for creative expression.”¹¹ In the end, hatred for Thurman was another mechanism by which the disinherited reinforce their own powerlessness.

Diagnosing a problem is usually easier than providing solutions. The final chapter of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, on love, was the most difficult chapter for Thurman to write. Love, in this context for Thurman, is a hard Gandhian love, sharp and penetrating as a laser, stripping the oppressor clean of defenses and pretenses. The ultimate goal, for one who has vanquished the hounds of hell is to go “with complete confidence...to meet the enemy upon the highway; to embrace him as himself, understanding his limitations and using to the limit such discipline upon him as he has discovered to be helpful in releasing and purifying his own spirit.”¹² A very tall order, perhaps. It was the essence of radical nonviolence.

Jesus and the Disinherited was published in April 1949. It did not make much of an initial stir in the publishing world. But it found the right readers. One of the first was in the fall of 1949 a second year student at Crozier Seminary, Martin Luther King, Jr. He quoted *Jesus and the Disinherited* in a student paper from the fall of 1949 (without attribution, as was his unfortunate style.) He wrote about the enslaved preacher Thurman writes about in his book. (It was a story told him by his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, born into bondage in Northern Florida around 1843.) When the preacher was allowed to preach without white supervision, he told his folk that “You—you are not niggers. You—you are not slaves. You are God’s children.” This, arguing King, (once again paraphrasing Thurman) “established for them a true ground of

personal dignity. The awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and bring new courage.”¹³ If King dated the beginning of his formal introduction to Gandhian nonviolence to a lecture delivered by Mordecai Wyatt Johnson (the president of Howard University, and one of Thurman’s most important mentors) in 1950, he was already, by the fall of 1949, attuned to the potential spiritual and political power of radical Christian non-violence. According to Lerone Bennett, King always cherished *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and carried a copy with him on his many travels.¹⁴ The road from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr. passed through Howard Thurman. To get to King’s dream, as both Thurman and King knew, African Americans first had to defeat the hellhounds on their trail.

¹ For a longer account of Thurman’s journey to India, going into more detail than is possible here, see Walter Earl Fluker, ed., The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman [hereafter PHWT] (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), Vol. 1, 180–339, and in 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), 65–151.

² The Negro Delegation travelled throughout British India (including what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh), Ceylon, and Burma, but the journey was invariably called the “India trip” by Thurman and others associated with it, and I follow that convention. All place names and territorial divisions are referred to by the names current in 1935 and 1936.

³ The main source for Gandhi’s meeting with the Negro Delegation is the account, “With Our Negro Guests” written by Mahadev Desai, Gandhi’s longtime personal secretary, published in Harijan, Gandhi’s weekly English language magazine, in March 1936, “With Our Negro Guests,” reprinted in PHWT, Vol. 1, 332–339. (The magazine’s title, Harijan, is Gandhi’s preferred name for the untouchables.) This is supplemented by Thurman’s many accounts of the meeting, including. “Mahatma Gandhi,” (1 February 1948), PHWT, Vol. 3, 255–262; “The Quest for Peace,” 24 July 1949; “Men Who Have Walked with God VI: Mahatma Gandhi,” 7 June, 1953; “Talks to Students From India” (1958); and Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman [hereafter WHAH], (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 130–135.

⁴ WHAH, 131–132

⁵ PHWT 2: 88–89

⁶ Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949)

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65

¹⁰ Ibid., 83,82

¹¹ Ibid., 88

¹² PHWT 1: 269

¹³ Clayborn Carson, ed., The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr I: 281, 245. For the influence of Jesus and the Disinherited on King, see Dixie and Eisenstadt, Visions of a Better World, 190–195.

¹⁴ Lerone Bennett, Jr., What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), 57–58