

III. Spirituality and Religious Experience

For Thurman, “religious experience” is central to the meaning and purpose of life. It involves a “conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God” which at the same time makes possible a communal relationship with others. Religious experience is nothing if it does not elicit a response from the individual involved in it; thus, the connection between spirituality and social action.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is “spirituality” for Howard Thurman? How is his understanding like or unlike your own understanding of that term? “Spirituality” is a problematic term for some people. Is there another term which, in your mind, better captures what Howard Thurman is about?
2. Scholar Luther Smith identifies three major themes in Thurman’s spirituality: 1) the significance of religious experience (i.e. mystical experience); 2) the hunger for community; and 3) the realization of a true sense of self. How do these things reflect Thurman’s desire for an outward-focused rather than an inward-focused spirituality?
3. Thurman asserted that “the personal is the social.” Reflecting on that quote, how does religious experience become the basis for social transformation in Thurman’s thought?
4. Thurman has often been referred to as a “mystic,” although according to scholars, he did not regularly apply that term to himself. In what ways is Thurman like or unlike the traditional Western stereotype of a mystic?
5. Thurman provides a “working definition” of mysticism in a lecture delivered late in his life in 1978. In that lecture, he defines mysticism as “The response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own soul.” What does this tell us about Thurman’s own understanding of this notoriously slippery term?
6. Thurman emphasized the practice of spiritual disciplines and wrote a book about them called *Disciplines of the Spirit* (1963). Which spiritual practices does Thurman particularly emphasize and why? Note that several of these disciplines have specifically to do with engagement with others.

Related Thurman Quotes:

*The human spirit has two fundamental demands that must be met relative to God. First, He must be vast, limitless, transcendent, all comprehensive, so that there is nothing that is outside the wide reaches of His apprehension. The stars in the universe, the great galaxies of spatial groupings moving in endless rhythmic patterns in the trackless skies, as well as the tiny blade of grass by the roadside, all are within His grasp. The second demand is that He be personal and intimate. A man must have a sense of being cared for, of not being alone and stranded in the universe. (**Essential Writings** 43; **Deep is the Hunger** 145-46)*

*I draw close to God as I draw close to my fellows. (**Meditations of the Heart**, 121)*

*The central fact in religious experience is the awareness of meeting God. The descriptive words used are varied: sometimes it is called an encounter; sometimes, a confrontation; and sometimes, a sense of Presence. What is insisted upon, however, without regard to the term used, is that in the experience defined as religious, the individual is seen as being exposed to direct knowledge of ultimate meaning . . . in which all that the individual is, becomes clear as immediate and often distinct revelation. He is face to face with something which is so much more, and so much more inclusive, than all of his awareness of himself that for him, in the moment, there are no questions. Without asking, somehow he knows. (**Essential Writings**, 38-9, **The Creative Encounter**, 23-24)*

*Religious experience in its profoundest dimension is the finding of man by God and the finding of God by man. (**The Creative Encounter**, 39; **Essential Writings**, 43)*

*In the total religious experience we learn how to wait; we learn how to ready the mind and the spirit. It is in the waiting, brooding, lingering, tarrying timeless moments that the essence of the religious experience becomes most fruitful. . . . In fine, I cannot command; I work at preparing my mind, my spirit for the moment when God comes to Himself in me. (**Essential Writings**, 45-6; **Temptations of Jesus**, 14)*

*. . . a man comes into possession of himself more completely when he is free to love another. (**Essential Writings**, 51; **The Luminous Darkness**, 111)*

*. . . the things that are true in any religious experience are to be found in that religious experience precisely because they are true: they are not true simply because they are found in that religious experience. . . . This is not to say that all religions are one and the same, but it is to say that the essence of religious experience is unique, comprehensible, and not delimiting. (**Essential Writings**, 79-80; **With Head and Heart**, 120-21)*

*. . . nonviolence is not merely a mood or climate, or even an attitude. It is a technique and, in and of itself, a discipline. (**Disciplines of the Spirit**, 114-115; **Essential Writings**, 125)*

*My testimony is that life is against all dualism. Life is One. . . . The Head and the Heart at last inseparable. (**Essential Writings**, 131; **With Head and Heart**, 269)*

*The burden of being black and the burden of being white is so heavy that it is rare in our society to experience oneself as a human being. It may be . . . that to experience oneself as a human being is one with experiencing one's fellows as human beings. Precisely what does it mean to experience oneself as a human being? In the first place, it means that the individual must have a sense of kinship to life that transcends and goes beyond the immediate kinship of family or the organic kinship that binds him ethnically or 'racially' or nationally. He has to feel that he belongs to his total environment. (**The Luminous Darkness** 94)*