

## VII. Thurman and African-American History and Culture

Howard Thurman's legacy is not only to be found in the fields of religion, spirituality, and civil rights, but also in African-American history and culture in general. Named one of the nation's leading Black preachers by *Time* and *Ebony* magazines, Thurman wrote books on Negro spirituals and about being Black and Christian in America, and he dissected the problems of racism in books, speeches, and sermons. Thurman's contributions to African-American culture are manifold and distinctive: He was one of the first African-Americans to meet with Gandhi and to preach non-violent resistance to American audiences; he co-founded and co-led one of the first intentionally interracial, interreligious churches in America (The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco); he was the first African-American chaplain at a large, majority-white university (Boston University); and he was one of the first interpreters of the spirituals.

### Questions to Consider:

1. How would you describe Howard Thurman's legacy for African-American culture? Which aspects of his work do you see as most significant for contemporary African-Americans?
2. Howard Thurman was, first and foremost, a preacher and a theologian. But he was also a writer, an accomplished poet, and a skilled interpreter of art and music. How does Thurman's work in these other fields underscore his legacy? Does it give him a broader appeal? Try to list the fields that Howard Thurman's legacy could be said to have touched, particularly in regard to African-American experience. What did he do in these other areas that was important?
3. Thurman wrote a seminal early study of the slave spirituals titled *Deep River* (Later reprinted with an earlier essay on the subject titled *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*.) For Thurman, the spirituals reflected the slaves' desire for freedom, their resistance to oppression and their descriptions of life under it, and God's promise of redemption. Their cries would be heard, and they would not be left alone. How resonant is Thurman's interpretation of the spirituals today? Do they have the same or similar meanings for us? What contribution does Thurman's work on the spirituals make for African-American history? Does he help to put this music into its original context?
4. While at Howard University, Thurman notably experimented with worship, including recreating well-known, biblically-themed European paintings as tableaux with Black student actors. What impact might this re-presentation of familiar European paintings (featuring European figures) have had on African-American worshippers who would not be used to seeing figures like themselves in biblical imagery? What might Thurman have been trying to say by undertaking these live portraits? Finally, how does this early attempt at re-presenting biblical narratives (1930s) fit into the "Black Christ" and "Black Christianity" movements which come later in the century?

5. Do you think that Thurman's other experimentation in worship, particularly with liturgical dance, reflects a desire to incorporate African-American traditions or themes into the worshipping experience? Can you identify specific cultural resources that Thurman may have drawn upon?
6. Some would argue that Thurman's desire to blend intellect with feeling in his preaching and liturgy is itself a reflection of his upbringing in African-American church traditions. Do you agree? Do those traditions provide more access to the emotions than do some others?
7. How does Thurman's pioneering work in civil rights, non-violence, university chaplaincy, church leadership, and worship arts (as cited in the introduction to this section) reflect the importance of his legacy for African-American history and culture. In what ways was he a "first" (or almost one) in terms of his various accomplishments?
8. In some ways, Sue Bailey Thurman's contribution to the history and preservation of African-American culture was even more direct than her husband's. What specific contributions did she make through speaking, organizing, and involvement with cultural institutions?
9. Describe the impact that visiting West Africa late in life had on Thurman. In what ways did that visit become an attempt on Thurman's part to reconcile various religious traditions and understandings with which he had struggled throughout his life?

### **Related Thurman Quotes:**

*The genius of the slave songs is their unyielding affirmation of life defying the judgment of the denigrating environment which spawned them. The indigenous insights inherent in the Negro spirituals bear significantly on the timeless search for the meaning of life and death in human experience. (**With Head and Heart**, 216)*

*And this is the miracle of their achievement, causing them to take their place alongside the great religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, a life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, worth living. (**Essential Writings**, 26; **The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death**, 135)*

*At Howard, I began to experiment with forms of worship other than usual religious services. The sermon was not always the centerpiece. Within the regular order of service, I provided stretches of time for meditation, a quiet time for prayers generated by silence. I also wanted to develop a service that would permit greater freedom for the play of creative imagination, a vesper service; these were called Twilight Hours. . . . One of the most daring of these . . . was the introduction of dance as a spiritual ritual. This was a hazardous experiment, because the general attitude toward dance was that it might be art but it was also entertainment. (**With Head and Heart**, 92-3)*

*[Approaching the coast of Africa] From my cabin window I look out on the full moon and the ghosts of my forefathers rise and fall with the undulating waves. Across these same waters, how many years ago they came. What were the inchoate mutterings locked tight within the circle of their hearts? . . . How does the human spirit accommodate itself to desolation? How did they? What tools of the spirit were in their hands with which to cut a path through the wilderness of their despair? (**With Head and Heart**, 193)*

*I hoped to find a common ground between Christian religious experience and the religious experience in the background and in the heart of the African people. If such a common ground could be located and defined, it seemed to me that the finest insights of Christianity could be energized by the cumulative, boundless energy of hundreds of years of the brooding spirit of God as it expressed itself in many forms in the life of a great people. (**With Head and Heart**, 197)*