

Luther Smith (1:51:00-1:53:31)

Often when people think of mysticism, they think of someone who is in some way disconnected from the realities of life and is having some kind of spiritual experience where they are assured of God's presence, and it just widens their mind and horizons about the very presence of the nature of God, and this person lives inside of that experience and all they do is then seek it again. Mysticism itself has many, many different expressions. Thurman's particular expression of mysticism . . . he describes religious experience as the conscious and direct experience of God. And that mysticism is an intense aspect of his conscious and direct experience of God, where the meaning of everything is somehow or other known, even if there are not the words to describe that meaning. And for Thurman it goes to how religious experience is a felt experience and how religion is not just a thought out experience. It has its thought out dimensions, but they emerge from the integrity of the experience itself. So Thurman is a mystic who feels the presence of God deeply, and there is for Thurman this awareness of God not only being present, but God loves me in a very personal and in a very private way, and that my life can be grounded in the assurance of God's love. This for Thurman is the depth of meaning and that what I am experiencing is not just intended for me, but is intended for everyone, and therefore I must be concerned not only about the experience I have had but also the extent to which others have access to such an experience or access to the meaning of community that I've derived out of this experience. So a mystical experience for Thurman is very personal and it's very communal.

Beverly Mitchell (00:32)

I think the formative ideas of his spirituality have to do with the importance that he places on the interconnectedness of all things, and that it's essential for us to be rooted or attuned to the interior life where God speaks, because out of that flows our external activity. . . . (01:26) It's an interior connection that flows and leads to the exterior in his thinking. (01:46) He recognizes that all of life is connected and that life is about engaging and living out of love.

Lerita Coleman Brown (05:43-06:46)

Howard Thurman believed that we needed to cultivate our spirits in many ways. Two of the ways . . . which he focused on were prayer. That is, regular, daily or consistent prayer and creating the atmosphere. He felt like silence again was important for prayer and readying the spirit for an encounter with God. He also felt like there needed to be commitment, that one needed to be committed to their spiritual life. Sometimes people will engage in spirituality, you know, for a little while and then when things feel a little bit better they may just lose their spiritual practices. He felt like it should be a part of one's life. So, there were these

disciplines that one needs to engage . . . on a regular basis so that we are constantly involved in spiritual growth and moving towards spiritual maturity.

Walter Earl Fluker (19:38-21:26)

The way he talked about [mysticism] was that, you know, 'It's religious experience. How do I make myself available to the immediacy of religious experience?' And he thought there were two principals involved in this religious experience. One is God, and one is the individual. There's no mediator, intercessor, between. It is the naked, raw experience. And it's not simply absorption, as many tend to think of mysticism, and to the absolute where I'm lost and a wanderer, the beatific vision of God. That's some of it. Thurman had language along the line of melding. Not melting, but melding into this moment. So that the individual maintains some of his or her own autonomy and agency. And God must, he thought, have autonomy and freedom or agency. But it's...at the same time this melding takes place, he thought, which leaves the human free and also responsible. So it's not simply being wrapped up in a mystery, and a wanderer, and absorbed in the nature and fullness of God. But one is also responsible for what she or he brings back to the world.

Alton Pollard (30:00-33:06)

What does Thurman mean by mysticism? I think in the first place, Thurman was always very careful to say that mysticism was not an exotic experience only to be experienced by a relative few. He was always very clear that mysticism as he understood it, meaning those moments of experience of the divine that are unconditioned, that have not been touched or sullied in any way, redacted or reformed by what one will later try to use as interpretive tools of language, of theology, of study, of ritual and liturgy, all of those things, all those come later. But in the actual moment of divine encounter, for Thurman, the opportunity, the moment when you are able to touch, in the biblical language, the hem of the garment, in the universal, simply touch that which is without condition, sacred, is for him the experience of utter sacrality, the mystical. And it is again something that anyone can have and it has little to do with one's education, it has little to do with one's background or condition or circumstance in life, it has everything to do with one's hunger and thirst to live in this world. And if you are a person who is indeed seeking God's face, Thurman seemed to be utterly convinced you had the capacity to have this kind of experience. You just didn't have the language for it or you didn't have the knowledge that says to you, this is mystical. And as he would talk, many would say, oh yes, I've had encounters like that but I did not have a handle for it. I didn't have marketing tools to give it. That's one of the things I find so beautiful about Thurman because he was never terribly concerned about the naming, the labeling, the branding. It was all about the experiencing, the journey, and inviting others into the same. Not experiencing precisely what he experienced, but experiencing in the contours of their own life's journey the utter

depths of the infinite that they could embrace that would also tell them much about themselves. I think he had that spot on.

Luther Smith (2:33:00-2:34:02)

There are at least two pivotal dimensions of Howard Thurman's legacy that I think are vital for us. One is Thurman's legacy in terms of the nature of the spiritual life, and how for Thurman the spiritual life is not only enriched, but the spiritual life gets its integrity for being connected to that which is external to us. That you don't have a deep inner life without a deep outer life, you don't have a deep outer life without a deep inner life, and when those two are placed in opposition to one another, it fails the person and it fails the people. Thurman's insistence on that and his help in understanding the way in which we can enter into the disciplines to address that, I think is important.

Lerita Coleman Brown (07:06-8:02)

Howard Thurman believed that contemplative prayer or spiritual practices were not just for an individual person. That they were to help you move to action. . . . He found that if one were going to live from that divine center, that place where the still small voice resides, that often it wasn't just to improve your life, that it was to then move you out into the world to address some of the social issues of the time. So spirituality wasn't just for an individual to improve their own lives, it was for improving the entire society for all people.

Luther Smith (30:07-30:58)

Thurman provided a spiritual perspective that was empowering. And it was something that not only the most educated could do, it was something that persons who were laborers in some of the most menial jobs could understand. They were given by God the power and the authority to respond to the realities of their injustice in ways that could be true to their faith, in ways that were true to Jesus' love ethic, and in ways that did not require them to compromise the integrity of who they were as persons who were called to love everybody.

Alton Pollard (16:34-18:17)

Thurman was of a different ilk, and he understood that as terribly important as social institutions are, getting them right on the page of equality, that the deeper issue was the fragmentation of the human spirit. Even beyond the divisiveness of issues of race, and gender, and sexuality, and language, and region, and religion, and nation, and all of these kinds of things, as critical as those are, for him it was the recognition that our human spirits are fragmented, our capacity to be at one with the universe, with the Divine, with God, whatever language one is most comfortable with, that sense of being centered in

one's own well-being. This for him was the piece that prevented many of us from being able to connect resolutely to another. And until we decide to go deeper within and not merely address the lateral dimensions of life, the sociological, the psychological, we're not able to bring about the beloved community, the commonweal of God, again whatever language one wants to use. And I think that this is one of the great contributions that he makes that for many of us is still a very elusive recognition.