

**Walter Earl Fluker (1:24:53-1:26:54)**

Thurman sees himself as a scientist almost, in a lab coat. You should picture him, experimenting with religious experience and ecclesiology. The ways we understand church and worship. So he introduces things like (and these were not common in this period) dance, liturgical [dance], during the service. Women with leotards dancing in worship. Or, in his...his love of the female image, much like Mary, Mother of God, he creates a liturgy with silhouettes of Black Madonnas . . . where women during the worship would actually assume the role of Madonna. Just a powerful statement about religion. But his major concern was to create a space, an atmosphere where the possibility of community could take place. He does this again at the Fellowship church when he leaves, but at Howard it's his early experimentation with his . . . answer to the question 'Is it true that in the presence of God there's neither male or female, black nor white, nor a Jew, nor any other characterization that would prevent us from being one? Is it true?' He's trying to answer. . . . And the hypothesis is if we can create experiences of unity over time intervals of sufficient duration, we should be able to undermine any barrier that stands between the individual and God and the individual and the Other. That's his experiment.

**Luther Smith (starts 2:00:02, with cuts)**

I think Fellowship Church was this kind of example that inspired persons in the adventure of interracial Church growth, but it was also challenging those who had become resigned to the separation of the races at what was often considered to be the most segregated hour of the United States---eleven o'clock on Sunday morning **(02:02:06)** . . . **(02:03:00)** Fellowship Church was really more than just the racial and ethnic and national composition of the congregation, it also was about deepening appreciation of the cultures. So, beyond the importance of having people who are different from one another coming together, it was how do we attend to with some depth the roots of our difference? The music, the food, the stories of the places from which we've come, what is happening to us as a people? And this really relates to that primary emphasis that Thurman has on going beyond contact, going beyond fellowship, but really having sympathetic understanding. And Fellowship Church worked at its members coming to appreciate the distinctiveness of each other. They also had a choir that travelled and appeared in places outside of California. Here was the church on the road, and its interracial, intercultural character being a witness through song, through beauty, in speaking the heart of the church. So, I think that's the primary witness of Fellowship Church, in some ways all the more indicating, 'What is the great sin of the Christian church, in terms of the racial divide?' And more than that, 'Is it possible to address that creatively?' And I think Fellowship Church was an example of a possibility of doing that. **(02:04:51)**

**Alton Pollard (19:07-19:52)**

[Rochester divinity school] Professor George Cross strongly challenged Thurman, deeply encouraged him because he was so admiring of Thurman's intellectual and spiritual gifts, to embrace the larger universal issues that were driving not only his personal existence, but the larger existence of us all. And Thurman's response to that was a very simple one

but a most eloquent one: That a man in his Black skin must face the timeless issues of life together. That there is no divorcing of one's empirical self, one's existential self from the larger issues of life.

**Otis Moss, III (02:21-2:57)**

There's this view that Christianity is held and is beholden to Europe. And Howard Thurman [is] writing from a perspective where the Christian view is not held and sequestered by the European view. And he brings his grandmother's theology, he brings in this community, and he gives an Africanity to the interpretation of Jesus that is bottom-up and not top-down and that's what I love about his interpretation.

**Lawrence Carter (starts 42:28 with cuts)**

Thurman was interested in people, not just preaching, but being the preachments itself. The preachments, themselves. Thurman thought that people had an ethical obligation to live up to the Gospel (42:53). . . . (43:14) Howard Thurman believed that everybody should emulate the historical Jesus. Its probably not an accident that black Americans talk more about Jesus. White Americans talk more about the Christ. One is abstract, one is very concrete. (43:34)

**Walter Earl Fluker (2:26:58-2:27:57)**

[On Thurman and diversity in the church.] Bringing the world into worship. And so you had these different cultures represented in the choir, you had them represented in liturgy and dance, and most importantly, for Thurman, I think, the fact that he was an African American person who came to that pulpit Sunday after Sunday. His embodied presence probably spoke in ways that even a good sermon couldn't get through. Because he was the leader of the congregation and many of the sermons, he's dealing with their...they are critiques of American...not patriarchy, but yes...but patriotism and critiques of race.

**Lawrence Carter (09:15-10:14)**

I think it may very well be that...Jesus, the religion of Jesus, and this is Thurman's wording, Thurman believed to be most appropriate for being the religion of African-Americans and oppressed people. Jesus was oppressed in his day and he thought that it would be unique relevance of the way Jesus dealt with his oppressors, spiritually. And from the lips of Jesus' mouth came the preachments love your enemies. So Howard Thurman's ministry is all about finding a way to love those people who don't respect your humanity.

**Luther Smith (08:02-09:02)**

I have heard [Professor James] Cone say that his work in Black liberation theology is indebted to Howard Thurman, especially Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*. He

credits Thurman with having this focus on what's occurring with African Americans and Jesus' relationship to that, and he indicated that it influenced his work. As well as Thurman's work on the spirituals. which Cone said informed his own thinking related to the book he [Cone] wrote on the spirituals and the blues. So in a public setting James Cone spoke about this and indicated that clearly Thurman has informed his work. . . . I thought that was important for those who are trying to track the formation of Black theology.

**Walter Earl Fluker (11:10-13:34)**

I liked to think of Thurman as the . . . early James Cone, or the forerunner of the Cones of the world. They lived in different times, Thurman during an era where respectability politics was huge. Where one had to follow some very...restrictive codes. Thurman in many ways during his time was iconoclastic. The work of *Jesus and the Disinherited* is just one example of that for Thurman. He's already rebelling against systems within his own time frame and asking very hard questions. The question like, "What does the gospel of Jesus have to say to those whose backs are against the wall?" Cone is asking that same question, really, in the late '60s with the rise of black power, black consciousness. And he does it, we felt in those days, with rage. . . . I don't see them being dissimilar in terms of the prophetic voice they raise for their respective generations. They do differ, however, in terms of Thurman's emphatic embrace of non-violent resistance and the notion of redemptive suffering. Cone is in a new era, where some new questions are being raised. . . . Cone is asking a question the same as Thurman that is directed to those whose backs are against the wall, but he's also saying that God is not only on the side of the oppressed, but to identify with this God, one must become black. Because black symbolizes the very nature of God, who is not only on the side of the oppressed but who has joined the oppressed in their suffering.

**Luther Smith (09:22-10:39)**

I think in the arc of Black theology, Thurman has his place, even though it's not necessarily a place and a trajectory that he is seeking to claim. Thurman understood this whole matter of *Jesus and the Disinherited* and the realities that occur with Black people as really the heart of the Christian message and Christian identity ... And he was speaking to that out of his times, I don't think he was trying to form a particular theology out of that. I feel that Thurman understood himself as reflecting what was, quote, "true Christianity," the religion of Jesus that was missed so much by churches, and what he felt was a religion about Jesus. So from Thurman's perspective, I don't think there was any intent in really being the launch for that kind of theological trajectory, as much as he saw himself as reflecting of what true Christianity is and is to be in light of the issues of the day.

**Luther Smith (22:49-24:52)**

I see *Jesus and the Disinherited* as a seminal writing in certainly theological works even though I don't think Thurman wrote it to be a significant piece for systematic theologians. It's a significant piece about the very nature of spirituality itself, but also I think Thurman's whole intent was to talk about what is at the core of Christian identity. And he made the plight of African Americans at the very core, at this point in time, of what Christian identity requires us to engage in some serious way. He compared African Americans to those with which Jesus was most active and speaking to their social conditions. And when you are an African American wondering the extent to which your faith is a resource for dealing with the oppression that is felt and you hear someone say your very identity is analogous to those with whom Jesus was most engaged in transforming their lives, that's a new kind of understanding.

**Walter Earl Fluker (2:17:03-2:19:05)**

Howard Thurman was not a musician. I think most people know that who knew him well. But he had an incredible appetite for the aesthetic. And one of those appetitive expressions was his understanding of the spirituals, his love for what was called the Negro Spirituals. So he writes *Deep River* and *the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. One of those was his Ingersoll lecture at Harvard in 1944, where he's plunging deep into the spirituals. He began this work in the late '20s. And when we think of Thurman looking at the spirituals as a source for religious and theological reflection, one needs to understand that he's pointing to what he thinks is idiomatic, or indigenous to, his own tradition and particularity. Read *Grandma Nancy*. And read his mother *Alice*. This long tradition. So he combs the spirituals. Normally in theology we look at scriptures, we look at tradition, we look at reason. Experience is where Thurman lands and this experience and tradition is important for him. So he says, "If we're going to answer this big question," which everybody asks of Thurman now-what does the religion of Jesus say to those whose backs are against the wall-one needs to look maybe in one's backyard and see what is in the tradition there and how others have resisted. The spirituals for Thurman were certainly songs of comfort, they were songs of aesthetic beauty, but they were also forms of resistance.

**Luther Smith (1:18:48-1:20:22)**

I think the spirituals were important to Thurman early on in his life. For example, Thurman speaks of a situation at Morehouse College when he was there, when there was this question as to whether or not the choir would sing the spirituals for a white audience. That the choir members basically feared the audience would be hearing them as a form of entertainment, whereas the spirituals were statement of, for the singers, of heritage, of people who had experienced, who were experiencing this tragedy of brutality and who were drawing upon their religious resources to overcome that. The singers of Morehouse

did not want this audience to hear them as simply providing tunes and melodies that failed to address the deeper meanings that were important to them as singers. I think even before Howard University, Howard Thurman himself had understood the spirituals as a significant resource not only for him personally but for the community of African American people.

**Eileen Guenther (5:52-6:11)**

Thurman focused on community and he was also well aware that what the spirituals offered was hope and comfort. When you're talking about Jacob's Ladder for instance, it's rooted in the ground, the ladder is on the ground, but then it goes to the heavens. It's an emblem of hope.// (6:36-6:45) And that was an important concept for those who were enslaved and it's an important concept for the spirituals themselves.

**Eileen Guenther (07:05-7:33)**

The spirituals give a sense of somebody-ness, that's James Cone's word, but it also applies to Thurman's ideas. In a situation where they are considered, a thing, a commodity, a utility, a non-person, a bit of property, in that situation the spirituals gave them self-respect, an idea that they were God's children.

**Eileen Guenther (13:48-14:59)**

The use of spirituals in the Civil Rights Movement just thrills my very soul. I love the spirituals to start with and I love the way that they make a difference in social justice in our time. There are original spirituals that are sung the way they were sung in the slave era, but then they re-text them, they contextualize them. So you have "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around" which was the original. But then they put in "Ain't gonna let Sheriff Clark turn me around, Ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me around, Ain't gonna let your dogs turn me around, Ain't gonna let the hoses turn me around." And it makes it real for them in that situation and it gives them faith, and motivation, and courage in a situation that, facing dogs and hoses, you need the courage if you're going to do it. And the music did that. There are other songs that are used in the Civil Rights Movement. "I Shall Not be Moved" is one, "This Little Light of Mine," many different verses get added. They sang so much in jails that one time a bunch of them were released from jail and the jailor was heard to say, "Thank goodness they're gone I couldn't stand their singing any more!"