

**The Confluence of Peace and Nonviolence
in Howard Thurman's Mystical Theology:
*A Call to "Center" from the Margins***

J. Ridgeway Addison
The Catholic University of America &
Georgetown University
Washington, DC

Three words to begin with: *anfanger*, *enigma*, *re-imagining*. The initial German completes one of my favorite of Rainer Maria Rilke's phrases, "Wir sind immer anfanger (we are always beginners)." Though offered mostly as a personal calming mantra as I take my place as a first-time presenter with such a creative crew of co-sharers and esteemed group of colleagues here in Atlanta, Rilke's nascent whisper might also serve our larger *communitas* of scholars. Aren't we always beginners—ever performing a perennial pursuit of our topic at hand? Most certainly a rational "problem," "mysticism" is likewise Marcelian "mystery"—a both ways looking riddle that we "scholarly" types, unlike perhaps those "pop-psych" types, must dually engage—head...heart. Mysticism...enigma. (May it always be so.)

Another enigmatic that or rather "who" exemplifies the Soellian "silent" (sometimes consciously Jantzenesque "marginalized") mystic "cry" beyond the bounds of "recognized" traditions is the twentieth century African-American mystic and public theologian Howard Thurman. A thick intellectual, he also honored the enigmatic, confusing fog 'round the "mystical." A story illustrates.

Waiting outside a lecture hall to speak, Thurman overheard two young men wondering if their speaker (Thurman) had arrived. "I wonder if the *mystic* has arrived yet?" says one to which the other replies, "Who?" His colleague responds, "You know, the "mystic"—the one who is going to pull the rabbits out of the hat." After Thurman's presentation no doubt these chaps had a more nuanced take on the "mystic" and on Thurman himself, the latter of which means, perhaps, they had something on many of you.

Though I don't promise magic, I do hope to at least begin to make what I perceive as a stark deficiency in the breadth of scholarly awareness of and attention to Thurman *disappear* as we go to work now to re-imagine the Thurmanesque collusion of peace, nonviolence, and mysticism. Thanks in advance for listening not just to but with me; may you be comforted knowing I will honor Mary Hunt's advice, "Be brief, be witty, be seated," as well as the maxim shared with Thurman himself by a preaching mentor; "Young man, when you have finished speaking, sit down."

Rehearsing Thurman's Narrative

As a Baptist minister, theologian, and "spiritual architect" of the American Civil Rights Movement, Howard Thurman (1899-1981) made significant contributions to the religious and ethical life of twentieth-century America. Growing up in a family of the black working poor, young Howard struggled with the disease of segregation. Early mystic encounters within Nature and Christian worship allowed him to fashion an internal "homeland." Receiving degrees from Morehouse then Rochester Seminary, he

began his career serving in various pastoral and academic posts at Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Howard University between 1929 and 1943. During these tenures, Thurman began a lifelong friendship with Mohandas Gandhi and also met the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in addition to studying under the Quaker mystic-philosopher Rufus Jones. A member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Thurman helped establish the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, serving at its first pastor. “Fellowship Church” was one of the first racially integrated, intercultural churches in the United States. Closing out his formal career serving as professor of spiritual resources and dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, Thurman was the first “black” man to serve as dean of chapel at a traditionally “white” university.

Parsing Thurman’s “Peace”

Thurman did not construct a formal “theology of peace” similar to those of Augustine, Tolstoy, and much more recently John Dear and William Shannon, however he dealt with the specific issue of peace in particular essays, sermons, devotional (i.e. “centering”) pieces, and lectures. I render this corpus his “‘peace’ literature.” Analysis of these sources in light of his primary texts evinces a working typology of peace emanating from his “mothering” paradigm of “community,” which theologian Walter Fluker rightly argues as the “central defining category” of Thurman’s life and thought.

In sum, Thurman equates community with wholeness, harmony, and integration stemming from his awareness that life itself is “alive,” that “life feeds on life...is nourished by life,” as it seeks, both at the particular and ecologic level, to “actualize” itself—“realize” its own potential. Rather than delineating this quest in either the single organism or the larger bio-matrix in which it emerges, Thurman’s “community” more magnanimously underscores their fundamental symbiosis which he takes as the primary sign of life’s unity which is not static but always arrives as “potential”—that which has not yet come to pass but is always coming to pass.” Any chance of community as cosmic happenchance for Thurman? No; Life’s symbiotic dance toward wholeness is Divine “Mind” incarnating in history; existence is “divine activity.” Within this organic tango, Thurman argues that the human organism engages a uniquely “co-creative” role in cultivating life’s harmonic as Divine initiative—an intent which only formally appears with humanity’s arrival on the evolutionary scene when mind as “mind” emerged.

While significant attention has been given to the sociopolitical dimensions of “community” (particularly Thurman’s analysis of interracial and interreligious relations) Thurman’s *organic* view that humanity is intended as a part of rather than apart from Creation (i.e. eco-community) seems to have been consistently undervalued. So too, the depth of his intricate attention to proper “sense of self,” or what may be termed “intrapersonal” community, seems seriously underplayed in previous analyses. Is there a collusion in these oversights? Before resetting these missing links into community’s surplus, just how deeply Thurman’s notion of “peace” manifest in his corpus of “peace literature” hinges on his conception of “community” must be demonstrated.

In his 1962 sermon, “Quest for Peace,” given at Boston University’s Marsh Chapel, Thurman describes peace as, “...a sense of well-being, a sense of being at one within oneself, a sense of being in active and creative correspondence with one’s environment...it is a sense of inner togetherness, it is a sense of tranquility, a sense of being whole.” Parsing this phrasing through his lens of “community,” I suggest

Thurman's ultimate paradigm of peace may be best extrapolated via the heuristic "peace *is/as community*." This construction is truly unique in its ability to detail Thurman's norm of absolute "peace" regarding both content and form. Ahoy Deconstructionalists! It's *unpacking time*...

Most basically, as "[a sense of] well-being, inner togetherness, tranquility, whole[ness]," peace is community. Yet, how does peace "happen" for Thurman? As community (in three primary ways). His concomitant use of the phrases, "inner-togetherness," "being at one within one's self—in active and creative correspondence with one's environment" renders peace as pericoreasis of intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, ecological, and cosmic wholeness. While preaching the primacy of what I term "intrapersonal" peace, Thurman concurrently argues that legitimate "inner" peace results from deep contact with, not escape from one's environs. Secondly, Thurman's consistent descript of peace as a "sense" rather than state of "well-being, tranquility, (et al)," posits peace as intuited experience of wholeness, one immersed in gradations of harmony as yet unestablished in final form. Peace *is/as community* = Process.

Thurman's notion of peace *is/as community* reaches its most vital meaning however when these points are scoped within community as Divine intent. Three implications arise. Most fundamentally for him, God is the ultimate author of peace. Second, *as community*, authentic peacemaking must grow out of Thurman's organic descript of love as "mutual understanding." This underscores his claim that authentic peace results from personal and social righteousness more than the "mechanical arrangements" of diplomats or "traditional" (read "lex talionis") justice.

Thus articulated, peace *is/as community* represents Thurman's ultimate (i.e. most "positive") paradigm of peace which, as recalled, opens into his typology of peace consisting of the "peace of innocence," the "peace of exhaustion," the "peace of violence," the "peace of cowardice [i.e. 'apathy,']" and the "peace of God." Interested in these? Ask me later or [email](#). Our consideration now shifts from delineating peace *is/as community* to deciphering the presence of its absence.

Touting peace *is/as community* as both Divine intent and human ideal, Thurman was also deftly aware of its absence. "Herein lies the ultimate paradox," he writes; "While it [peace] has been dreamed of and worked for...it has never been experienced in human history." Either peace is at one with the "intimate processes of life," or "there is something so utterly demonic about the nature of life that it fills the brains and emotions of men with an insatiable longing which has no basis in reality." To which he replies, "...and I don't believe the latter." Through analysis of creation-mythology, Thurman claims life emerged within primordial peace—a "peace of innocence, [it is] the peace that is peaceful because that is all it knows." When mind as "mind" emerged as human faculty, the organism activates its potential against community through free choice—shattering "innocence" and injecting disharmony into life as cosmos. "The animals began to draw away from man, and men...from each other. Fear...appeared." Worse yet Thurman notes, "something in him is broken down." Farewell to innocence.

But not to ultimate peace. Thurman argues that innocence is finally immature and that only through embracing the "fall," and the release of disharmony into existence can truest peace *is/as community* be achieved. At its depths, such peace is not the absence of discord—rather the blending of chaos with harmony toward higher fusion. Integral to this conception is Thurman's claim of evil as "upender." Fluker notes that for Thurman evil is

not “foreign” to life, instead it is woven into its very fiber and life is “good” for him precisely in its inclusion of good and evil. As the omnipresent “positive, destructive” (organic) principle working against harmony, evil guarantees life’s divinely mandated dynamism.

Thurman’s ethical project then is “goodness,”—the art of blending the potential for disharmony and harmony. Though not entirely eradicable, evil must be consistently and creatively resisted individually and collectively at every level of existence. Failure to tame evil looses deception, fear, and hatred resulting in intrapersonal chaos Thurman likens to the Markan demoniac and invades history and culture as four primary “social ruptures” I argue Thurman diagnosed within history—racism/segregation, poverty, military conflict (i.e. “war”), and environmental degradation. His definition of violence as “the use of force by one party (i.e. person, collective, political actor) to impose its will on another” comes into play. While differentiating personal and social violence (albeit sometimes only marginally), Thurman maintains that authentic transformation of violence on all levels requires a shift from “contacts without fellowship” among principals to love’s relational pattern of “mutual understanding” and that mystical experience is a primal seedbed inspiring such change.

Going “Mystic” with Thurman

Only through going “mystic” with Thurman (not Van Morrison) can what I term his “mystical dynamics” of peacemaking and nonviolence not be “taught,” but rather as he often said—“caught.” Seeded within his own mystical trysts in earl childhood through his final struggle with cancer, Thurman’s “search into mysticism” was also vitalized by the witness of his grandmother, Mohandas Gandhi, the Black Church, the Quakers (particularly Rufus Jones), as well as his study of the slave “spirituals,” and his deep appreciation and study of the mystics of the Church and other axial faith traditions. Far from being solely an individual path to “inner” peace, mysticism for Thurman was also the ultimate *piece de resistance* to social injustice; and the mystic—the most radical “apostle of sensitiveness” affecting social transformation. Simple and sophisticated, his treatment of mysticism presents as highly creative and significant “theology”—which, according to theologian Luther Smith, “reads more like a prayer of praise than a dogmatic doctrine.” Thurman’s “way” invites “lived” mysticism. Discussion of his take on the differential between religious and mystical experience will have to wait for [questions and answers](#) later in our program.

Thurman defines mystical experience as, “the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own spirit.” Such a response is *total* for Thurman, “affecting the inner quality of the life and its outward expression and manifestation.”

Four particular elements specifically related to the cultivation of peace *is/as community* play into mystical encounter for Thurman: fontal unity, “gentling” Love, “whole-making” energies, and finally the “peace of God.” Though fontal unity obtains prominently in Thurman, it has been underappreciated in previous scholarship. While he lifts up the individual and God as the two primary principles within the “creative encounter,” Thurman also goes “Eckhartian” in that while individual personality is affirmed, “the boundaries of the self do not hold,” thus opening the door for autotheistic rhetoric as interpretation. Such experience of organic oneness highlights the mystic’s “at-

one-ment” with Creation—a oneness evidenced in his own “working paper,” devotional texts, and under-examined articles (i.e. “Mysticism and Ethics,” “Standing Inside with Jesus Christ”) that invites recovery of the profoundly ecological dimensions of peace *is/as community*.

Thurman’s analysis of the “gentling” quality of Divine Love, a descriptive lifted from psychological article detailing experiments with “gentled” rats, heightens his qualitative understanding of God’s “Presence” as it “gentles” the soul, or more poignantly for Thurman, “tames my temperament’s wild horses.” The “gentling” of Divine Love triggers the release of “whole-making” energies when the “inner citadel” of the human spirit is infused with the profundity of its Creator. Thus while Amadeus pacifies the “warring” spirit, it also energizes the individual as historical agent to recommit self to disciplines that perpetuate inner-vitality and centeredness from which a Christic pattern of self-less “suffering” love for others then emerges.

While Thurman viewed these mystical dynamics as transformative in regards to race relations, he also lifted mystical consciousness as a prime resistance to blind acceptance of military engagement by the common citizen as set forth in a handful of anti-war sermons like “The Community of Fear.”

While these new directions exemplify Thurman’s rich social witness as the Pollardian “mystic-activist,” affirming sustained cultural transformation as possible, his own experience of segregation, training in the Spirituals, and final struggle with cancer reminded him that blissful peace was rarely possible in the world. Thus, Thurman’s comprehension of the mystic “peace of God,” also termed by him as “the peace of endurance and triumph”—“the peace that comes when the struggle of life is not relieved... comes ‘shimmering on the crest of a wave of pain.’” Such peace seems, in the end, the ultimate gifting of mystical experience for it tranquilizes the soul so that “whatever life may do an individual,” he “never gives up.” It invites peace *is/as community* not as pitiful withdrawal but as dynamic experience via a sense of “active and creative correspondence with one’s environment.” While touching only briefly on Thurman’s fingering of “fontal unity,” “gentling Love,” “whole-making energies,” and the “Peace of God,” perhaps I have said my piece at least in this programmed arena and now frame a three-point conclusion recasting Thurman’s “nonviolence.”

Recasting Thurman’s “Nonviolence”

First, as an informal mystical theology of peace, the notion of Thurman’s peace *is/as community* offers much to contemporary spirituality scholars interested in the mystical dimensions of peace and nonviolence, especially those working in ecology, social ethics, and personal spiritual formation. Secondly, whereas “community” has been utilized by previous scholars primarily as a sociopolitical heuristic, its reworking through peace *is/as community* allows a proper expansion of Thurman’s “peace witness,” as one that, while primed on race and faith relations, also transmits ecological and militaristic concerns. Thirdly, the social, political, militaristic, and ecological concerns with peace are ultimately contingent for Thurman on the healing of the “inner breach” within each individual. Creative scholarly attention recommitted to what I have termed the “intrapersonal” mystical tryst and its reconciliatory affects toward peacemaking at all levels, coupled with the suggested expansion of the social view of community toward issues of “war” and “environment” deepens Thurman’s “‘peace’ witness” and therefore

adds integrity to his overall religious project—which conducts nonviolence not only as a form of active social resistance but of internal and relational return to the oneness of life as well—a oneness which the “human organism,” along with all other forms of life, seeks at every level of existence.

So then, while I haven’t pulled rabbits from hats, I hope I have presented something of the enigma of Thurman’s mystical theology as what it truly is: a call to “center” from the margins.

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Individuals and groups interested in investigating Thurman’s primary materials for themselves in light of my paper may wish to inquire to Friends’ United Press (Richmond, Indiana) to order his more well known treatments: *The Search for Common Ground*, *The Creative Encounter*, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, and *The Growing Edge* (particularly the sections “Concerning Prayer,” and “Concerning Peace”). I am happy to hear questions, criticisms, or deepen conversations with other scholars and seekers and hope inquiring minds will contact me at jra3@georgetown.edu.