

Howard Thurman and Troeltsch's Third Type

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He has been described as “a mover of movers, a teacher of teachers,” and “a leader of leaders.”¹ Benjamin Mays said that to encounter him was to have freedom leap out at you in every direction.² Despite the struggles Howard Thurman endured as a black man in America, growing up in the South in the beginning of the 20th Century, he continually worked for love and harmony. His influence is far reaching, and many social activists have pointed to Thurman as an inspiration and source of vital energy for their struggle.

Yet despite the claims that he inspired others to action, the main critique levied against Thurman points to his lack of active involvement in the organized Civil Rights Movement. Though he certainly published works, like *Luminous Darkness* and *Search for Common Ground*, which address the issues of segregation and Civil Rights, he did not regularly participate in the meetings and protests of the Movement. Most will recognize that Thurman had a significant impact on the lives of particular individuals, but few maintain that his work served to promote organized movements for social change. Howard Thurman was a mystic, who has endured the fate of many mystics before and since: his ideas have been labeled as lacking impetus for social engagement. This paper will provide an introduction to the mystical theology of Thurman, using Ernst Troeltsch's description of Christian mysticism, will argue that Thurman's thought does in fact

¹ Jesse L. Jackson in *Howard Thurman: His Enduring Dream* by George K. Makechnie, (Boston: The Howard Thurman Center, Boston University, 1988), 65. This book is largely composed of an array of leaders commenting on Thurman's influence.

² Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*, (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1981), 23.

promote social change as a mixed form of this type and will give a brief proposal as to what incorporated tradition may advance social engagement within Thurman's mystical framework.

In order for a person's work to be classified as social action, it most typically must be related to organized movements, resulting in measurable outcomes in society at large. Although Thurman's vision of social change stands outside these traditional conceptions of social action, as he focuses on the fulfillment of the individual, he clearly pursues this for the sake of the community, as we will see further on. Fostering an awareness of one's invaluable worth, which Thurman emphasizes, is a necessary step toward positive social change in his context and in that of many other oppressed communities. It alone would not produce the desired social change, but is a crucial component to many forms of social action. A prime example of the Thurman's contribution to social change from this orientation is found in his work entitled: *Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*. In this book Thurman identifies one of the first barriers to be overcome in the struggle for Civil Rights to be the self-loathing imposed upon the African American community by centuries of enslavement and oppression. Thurman describes the mental ramifications of this racist structure, identifying the evil of segregation as "the imposition of self-rejection," which "settles upon the individual a status which announces to all and sundry that he is of limited worth as a human being. It rings him round with a circle of shame and humiliation. It binds his children with a climate of no-accountness as a part of their early experience of the self."³ The task of fostering a sense of self-worth

³ Howard Thurman, *Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 24. Thurman concludes this

and identity within a community thus rendered is a crucial step in empowering the community to work toward a change in society at large. Thurman's work empowers one from within, through a confidence in one's infinite value in God. To assume that promoting self-fulfillment and self-love does not promote social change in a community plagued by the identity crises described by Thurman, is, in my opinion, a blind and biased supposition.

The communal emphasis of Thurman's work and its contribution to efforts for social change, have led some to suggest that Thurman and mystics like him, defy Ernst Troeltsch's tri-part typology: Church, Sect, and Mysticism. Troeltsch, as you may know, introduced the Mystic type to the sociology of religion, developing his idea most thoroughly in his *Social Teachings of the Christian Church*, published in 1912. Since then his Third Type, Mysticism, has been much debated. Some scholars have argued that a mystic engaged in social action proves Troeltsch's typology obsolete. I have been unable to find one, however, who argues that Troeltsch's description of Christian mysticism is theologically inaccurate.

My following argument will take Troeltsch's assessment of mysticism in his *Social Teachings* as a starting point. His description of the theological similarities among Christian mystics is a helpful tool for identifying which elements of a mystic's thought may be derived from another perspective. His portrayal of mysticism in both pure and mixed forms, is strikingly similar to work being done in the field today. Although Troeltsch notes that mysticism in its purest form does not tend to promote social engagement, he does give examples of elements from other types which when adopted

section with the following statement: "And for this there is no forgiveness, only atonement. And only God can judge of what that atonement consists."

into a general mystic conception, may indeed prove supportive of social action. The Quakers are a prime example of this potential: they united mystical ideas with the “Baptist ideal of the pure and holy voluntary community” and adopted the Mennonite constitution, which provided a foundation for the ethical focus of the Quakers, according to Troeltsch.⁴ One finds similar arguments in James Horne’s *The Moral Mystic* and to a certain degree in the work of William Wainwright. Both Horne and Wainwright recognize the potential for mysticism to include ethical activity when of a mixed form, with roots in a theistic tradition.

In the time remaining, I will use Troeltsch’s Mystical Type to examine the elements Thurman shares in common with Christian mystics, in order to identify principles in his thought not inherent to pure mysticism and will make a suggestion as to what elements he may have incorporated to allow for the classification of his corpus among this form, that is a mixed mysticism, one which can promote social change.

The mystic has a unique relationship with traditional Christian dogma, as according to Troeltsch the tolerant spirit of mysticism “regards every kind of dogmatic formulation as merely approximate knowledge”.⁵ Howard Thurman’s relationship to dogma is similar, but perhaps for slightly different reasons. As co-founder of the Church of the Fellowship of All Peoples, Thurman set out to establish a place of worship that was free of dogma, because he saw doctrine creating division instead of the unity God desires among all people.

Troeltsch describes the mystic’s conception of the cosmos as one in which God is the foundation of all existence, endowing every soul with a Divine Spark. The Fall is

⁴ Ernst Troeltsch, *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon, (Louisville, Westminster Knox Press, 1931), 780.

⁵ *Ibid*, 763.

generally viewed by mystics not as the abrupt obliteration of all potential for good in the individual as a result of sin, but as a turning away from God in pursuit of selfish and sensual desires. The image of God, or the Spark of the Divine, is not lost in this turning away; it remains within the individual but is concealed. This is the source of all longing for God, and is the ultimate underlying truth of the Christian experience of salvation, which in a mystic's perspective is a process through which the image is restored, or the spark uncovered, as the soul gradually ascends to union with God. Salvation so conceived has no necessary contingency on "historical facts", objective beliefs, or "external authority".⁶ Redemption is a result of the inward movement of the soul.

Thurman's conception of the state of creation corresponds with this general mystical cosmology. When describing the original state of creation, Thurman avoids language of perfection, and instead speaks of harmony. Humanity was created to experience responsibility, which can only be achieved, according to Thurman, through a combination of freedom and prohibition.⁷ Thus humanity was created with the potential for both harmony and disharmony. This potential disharmony then became actualized through choice, resulting in the current state. That is: humanity acutely aware of the "absence of harmony."⁸ Thurman was concerned with recovering the original state of harmony.

As salvation is not an objective fact that occurs through assent to particular beliefs, but is a subjective experience of progressive growth, the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins loses its primacy. Thus, Troeltsch is bold enough to say that the

⁶ Ibid, 738.

⁷ See Howard Thurman, *Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971).

⁸ Ibid, 24.

mystic has “no need for the doctrine of the atonement”.⁹ Here too Thurman’s theology fits with Troeltsch’s description. He considered redemption to be a gradual, progressive conversion and did not hold to a doctrine of the atonement, but saw the death of Christ as an example of the sort of abuse one may have to endure if one strives wholly after God.¹⁰

According to Troeltsch mystics also tend to have no interest in the doctrine of the Incarnation.¹¹ This is likewise true of Thurman, who states clearly that Jesus is a fellow worshipper of God, and not the one to be worshipped. Jesus is a figure central to Christianity, and one with whom Thurman believes all religious people will eventually come into contact; however, Jesus is not the objective divine revelation. Jesus is an example of one who led a harmonious life in union with God, a life which all Christians should strive to imitate, as all humanity bears this potential. Thurman does strongly emphasize the historical particularity of Jesus, but he firmly resists forming absolute doctrines based upon his existence.

The mystic rejects the doctrine of Predestination and those doctrines related to it (Original Sin, Total Depravity, Reprobation, and Election), as according to Troeltsch, together these would destroy the foundation of mysticism, by undercutting human agency, and by making a logical impossibility of the Divine spark within every soul. Thurman likewise rejects doctrines related to Predestination, but states different reasons for doing so. Although he affirms free choice and the Divine within all life, he explicitly

⁹ Troeltsch, 747.

¹⁰ See Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1981).

¹¹ See Troeltsch, *Social Teachings*, 747. On this point I think Troeltsch may have over stated his case. Though, certainly numerous mystics, and perhaps this is generally true of the mystics of the modern period, but the incarnation can serve as a central doctrine for some Christian mystics, and it has historically, as it functions as the foundation for the belief that union between God and the human can and does occur. The fact that in Christ both the divine nature and the human nature were united and yet remained *distinct*, makes subsequent unions possible. The question which remains, and Troeltsch does note this, is regarding the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Is that complete union with God possible with other humans in this life?

rejects Predestination, because of its link with white racism. Predestination and those doctrines related to it, set up a universal, divinely sanctioned inequality: some are eternally blessed to be chosen by God for salvation and others are eternally selected for damnation. Some are chosen for privilege; others are chosen for suffering. Under such a system justice is not administered with equality. Thurman writes, “It is unspeakably ironical that the tremendous doctrine of grace may become a part of the supporting ground for racial and religious bigotry.”¹²

One of the foundational principles of Christian mysticism is the unification of all life through the common Source of God; Troeltsch speaks of this as the Divine Ground of the Soul. Thurman laid heavy stress upon this concept, writing at length about the interconnectedness of life throughout the entire cosmic structure, including animal and plant life. One’s very consciousness is connected to that of others. Beyond this metaphysical connection, however, Thurman strongly emphasizes the importance of knowing and loving other people concretely. He is not interested in cultivating a spiritual connection that has no physical consequence.¹³ In the essay, “Mysticism and the Experience of Love”, Thurman describes the necessity of knowing another person’s “fact” in order to truly love her or him. He says, “To speak of the love for humanity is meaningless. There is no such thing as humanity. What we call humanity has a name, was born, lives on a street, gets hungry, needs all the particular things we need.”¹⁴ Love does require us to develop a general sphere of acceptance that will allow us to love

¹² Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 63-64.

¹³ Perhaps this is another example of his principle of unifying dualities.

¹⁴ Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and the Experience of Love,” in *For the Inward Journey*, ed. Anne Spencer Thurman, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984).

anyone with whom we come in contact, but the emphasis is always on loving in the particulars.

As Thurman considered the goal of existence to be unity and harmony, it is not surprising that this concept led him to oppose every form of segregation, even the voluntary self-determined segregation sometimes proposed by other African-American leaders for the strengthening of the community. Thurman concludes his book *The Search for A Common Ground*, with a critique of that proposal, and writes, “Men, all men, belong to each other, and he who shuts himself away diminishes himself, and he who shuts another away from him destroys himself.”¹⁵ Also in his book addressing the issue of segregation, *Luminous Darkness*, Thurman expresses this vision of unity:

“The fact that the first twenty-three years of my life were spent in Florida and in Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit and has rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black. Living outside of the region, I am aware of the national span of racial prejudice and the virus of segregation that undermines the vitality of American life. Nevertheless, a strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide and would achieve in literal fact what is experienced as literal truth: human life is one and all men are members one of another. And this insight is spiritual and it is the hard core of religious experience.”¹⁶

Another common feature among Christian mystics, according to Troeltsch, is toleration for other religions and other paths to God other than that through Christ. Mystics recognize in all concrete positive religions the fundamental process of salvation. Conceiving the Absolute as existent within all that is relative, the mystic is comfortable with relative conceptions of Truth. It is only through this embracing of relativity which eradicates from religion the urgent desire to possess the one Absolute Truth.

¹⁵ Ibid, *Search for Common Ground*, 104.

¹⁶ Ibid, *Luminous Darkness*, x.

Thurman was not only tolerant of other religions, but remained committed to an inclusive posture to other faiths, co-founding a church the very principle, with a white Presbyterian minister. The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples was formed as a God-centered community, who gathered for worship among other activities, while recognizing truth from a variety of paths. The church creed, for example, adds other dimensions to the oft quoted Galatians 3:28, stating that in the act of worshipping God, “There is neither male nor female, Black nor White, Protestant nor Catholic nor Buddhist nor Hindu...” According to Thurman, recognition of God as the source of all life and love, “is not peculiar to any one religion but is shared by many.”¹⁷

The final characteristic of mysticism raised by Troeltsch in his *Social Teachings* that we will examine, is the mystic’s understanding of the function and authority of Scripture. Mystics generally view Scripture as something that ignites the Divine Spark in the soul, but does not in and of itself possess objective authority. Scripture is a narrative of the inner spiritual experience of the writers and of those in the communities described. In this sense it has real authority, but it is hardly different than the genuine authority of any individual’s experience of God.

For Thurman Jesus and the Bible are never the final source of authority; they are a way to the final authority, which is God, known through religious experience. Yet, Thurman finds the historical particularity of Christ to be important for religion. A disregard for the historicity of Christ, according to Thurman, corresponds with the tendency to abstraction and generalization which is often used in society to disguise the

¹⁷ Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, 176. Quoted in William Apel, “Journey Toward Meaning: The Particular and the Universal in Howard Thurman’s Thought,” in *The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom, Proceedings of the Second Annual Thurman Convocation*, ed. Mozella G. Mitchell, 65-78, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1992), 73.

specifics of oppression and abuse. This concern with historical particularity, stemming from his awareness that abstraction covers up the suppression of historical fact, sets Thurman apart from many mystics.

When Troeltsch describes what he considers the characteristics of pure mysticism, the portrayal does not exhaust the thought of Howard Thurman. Troeltsch defines mysticism in its purest form as a spiritual religion which forms only “loose and provisional” communities, “lays no stress at all upon the relation between individuals”, and “regards the historical... elements in religion merely as methods of quickening the religious sense”, tending even “to sweep away the historical element altogether”.¹⁸

We have seen that Thurman shares many beliefs in common with Troeltsch’s Third Type: God as the foundation of all life, uniting all existence and endowing each individual with a Divine Spark; a lack of constructive interest in dogma, along with a rejection of traditional understandings of salvation and Predestination; a departure from the conception of the loci of authority in Church or Scripture, locating it instead within the spiritual experience; and a toleration of other religions as legitimate paths to union with God. However, we have also found in Thurman a mysticism that lays heavy stress on relations between individuals, emphasizes the historical particularity of Jesus, and supports the forming of a church body with a constitution and creed. Thurman’s mysticism, like that of the Quakers, may be considered a hybrid, incorporating other elements into his religious conception, which allows his mysticism to break with certain tendencies often found in the purest form of this type.

¹⁸ Troeltsch, 743.

Although the majority of Thurman's pastoral experience was in a multi-racial, non-denominational church, his pastoral career began in a black Baptist church. Using Peter Paris' book, *The Social Teachings of the Black Churches*, I propose that some of the fundamental characteristics unique to Thurman's mysticism stem from the black church tradition, particularly: the vital communal element and principles of equality, individual worth, and nonracism. I have only a few moments, so I can only place the suggestion before you and hope for further conversation.

Paris states that for the black church the doctrine of human equality under God is "the final authority for all matters pertaining to faith, thought and practice."¹⁹ The black church did not create this concept, which they recognize as the biblical conception of humanity and its relation to God, however, the black church has uniquely embodied and institutionalized this principle. Paris also explains that the principle of nonracism is fundamental for "justifying and motivating all endeavors by blacks for survival and social transformation."²⁰ Thurman's context within the African American community and the influence of the Black Church's emphasis on non-racism, keeps him from following other mystics, for example, in their lone regard for the universal, at the expense of the particular.

Additionally, the Black Church has historically striven to foster within the individual a sense of worth and identity while society has continually told its members otherwise. Peter Paris quotes Thurman on this issue, stating that the Black Church has been the rallying center for the Civil Rights Movement, not because of its religious ethic,

¹⁹ Peter Paris, *The Social Teachings of the Black Churches*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 14.

²⁰ Ibid, 99.

but because it is the place where African-Americans “are somebody.”²¹ According to Paris this has been the primary focus of the leaders in black churches as they face “the task of creating a socio-psychological support system for all endeavors of the race.”²² Thurman’s theology incorporates this emphasis, as well as provides an additional foundation for it. The mystical conception of the Divine Spark within the soul is a principle that can foster individualism and asocial behavior, as one focuses on God within oneself, as Thurman himself recognized. However, when the mystical understanding of the Divine in each individual is fused with the guiding principles of the black church, it becomes a source for freedom, equality, as well as individual worth. In addition, it provides a basis for ethical activity, as one strives toward a harmonious community based upon this common status. For Thurman, the infinite worth of the individual is bound with that of all other individuals in the common source of God, making one’s well-being bound to that of the other.²³ The whole society is affected when one individual cannot reach self-fulfillment. Though he is concerned with universals--the common ground, the divine within all--he emphasizes that the path there is always laid through the particularities of life, through concrete loving acts. Thus Thurman’s thought provides impetus for people of all races and beliefs to strive for equality, tolerance, and harmony, as they work together for social change.

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²¹ Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 21.

²² Paris, 72.

²³ Thurman, *Search for Common Ground*, 96.