

Black Theology And Religious Experience

A decade has passed since James Cone aroused the theological world with his *Black Theology and Black Power*; Cone severely criticized white theologians for ignoring the black plight in America, and he began to define and outline a theology to address the conditions and needs of black people. The ensuing development of Black Theology, by Cone and other theologians, resulted in a significant corpus of literature relating theology to black religion and strategies for eradicating the social, economic, and political oppression of blacks. This literature made a major contribution to theology in proclaiming that God's love and power are functioning among the oppressed for their salvation: salvation from dehumanizing life conditions, salvation to fully respond to God's purposes for humanity. Far too little attention, however, has been given to religious experience and spiritual development; elements which are essential to a vital and enduring faith.¹

James Cone acknowledges that "Fellowship with God is the beginning and the end of human liberation."² He continues by professing conversion (religious experience) as the foundation of Christian faith. The focus on personal religious experience, however, changes quickly to an analysis of the oppressed community. Cone never tarries with the nature and implications of religious experience. He states that it is crucial, yet a small percentage of his writing is devoted to it.³ J. Deotis Roberts gives a more extensive treatment to the subject. In *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black*

¹The terms "spirit," "spiritual," and "spirituality" are used extensively throughout this article, and therefore require clarification. Spirit is the "breath of God" in creation, providing value and meaning to existence. Realizing and expressing itself in the material world, the work of the spirit is historical and political. It is the source for definition of the individual, and the individual in relationship to the collective. As it discerns self, it discerns God; and what it means to be a creature of God. The term "spiritual" is used as an adjective, indicating that something is "of" or "related to" the spirit (e.g., a spiritual concern is a concern which relates to the well-being of, or the interest of, the spirit; a spiritual discipline is something one does to discern and express the work of the spirit). Spirituality is a way of life committed to understanding the nature and urgings of the spirit; the life organizes all its desires, energy, and resources so that they might be dominated by the spirit. Spirituality brings a harmony to living consistent with the peace and will of God.

²James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*. (New York: Seabury Press; A Crossroad Book, 1975), p. 141.

³The "Introduction" of Cone's *God of the Oppressed* shares how his faith and religious development are grounded in the religious experiences of his youth. In Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues* several of his interpretations focus on the importance of religious experience to the slaves. Still, these references do not develop into a thorough consideration on the meaning of religious experience.

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Theology and *A Black Political Theology* Roberts explores the interdependence between personal religious experience and community liberation. Both scholars commit the major portion of their writing, however, to delineating a theology for redressing systems that oppress black Americans. Discerning the structures, dynamics, and effects of systems is a complex and complicated endeavor, but the same is true for religious experience. It too requires considerable explication in order to resource a liberation consciousness. The nature and meaning of religious experience cannot be assumed; the disciplines of Christian spirituality cannot be ignored. And cursory comments will not suffice for revealing their central place in Christian faith and life. If Black Theology is to inform the liberation of black people, employing the full testimony of Christian faith, more writing and discourse will have to interpret the significance of religious experience and spiritual development to liberation.

LIBERATION AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Religious experience is defined by Howard Thurman as "the conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God. Such an experience seems to the individual to be inclusive of all the meaning of his life — there is nothing that is not involved."⁴ This "exposure" is necessary, says Thurman, because *truth must be experienced*. Truth is more than idea or belief, it is Reality; and the individual must encounter it, not only with the mind, but with the whole self. Religious experience is therefore the way to attain religious knowledge; and religious knowledge is necessary for liberation activities to be in accordance with God's will.

Liberation's dependence upon religious experience is evidenced in each stage of the liberating process. First, heightened awareness of one's oppression leads to ultimate questions concerning personal identity. Who am I? What is my worth? The person seeks some definition of self which explains his/her existential situation. If the definition of self is distorted, then oppressive external conditions will prevail. Liberation theologian Rosemary Ruether addresses this relationship when she writes:

They [the oppressed] have been victimized by their powerlessness, their fear and their translation of these into an internal appropriation of subservient and menial roles. They have internalized the negative image projected upon them by the dominant society. They cower before the masters but are also filled with a self-contempt which makes them self-destructive and fratricidal toward their fellows with the oppressed community. Typically the oppressed turn their frustration inward, destroying themselves and each other, not the masters.

Liberation for the oppressed thus is experienced as a veritable resurrection of the self.⁵

This "resurrection of the self" is assured only when self-defining is grounded in an experience with God; in this Presence the self discovers its "being," and senses Ultimate Love. Questions of personal identity are not

⁴Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1954), p. 20.

⁵Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), p. 12.

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answered by social criteria, but knowledge from an encounter with the very source of truth. Out of this experience the oppressed are "set at liberty." Who am I? I am God's beloved one! What is my worth? I have ultimate worth!

Religious (mystical) experience is the basis for personal *and* social identity.⁶ It not only affirms the self, but reveals the relatedness of self to others; a relatedness characterized by love. In describing the convictions of Christian mystics Walter Stace writes:

The Christian mystics especially have always emphasized that mystical union with God brings with it an intense and burning love of God which must needs overflow into the world in the form of love for our fellow-men; and that this must show itself in deeds of charity, mercy, and self-sacrifice, and not merely in words.

Some mystics have gone beyond this and have insisted that mystical consciousness is the secret fountain of all love, human as well as divine; and that since love in the end is the only source of true moral activity, therefore mysticism is the source from which ethical values ultimately flow. For all selfishness and cruelty and evil result from the separateness of one human being from another. This separateness of individuals breeds egoism and the war of all against all. But in the mystical consciousness all distinctions disappear and therefore the distinction between "I" and "you" and "he" and "she." This is the mystical and metaphysical basis of love, namely the realization that my brother and I are one, and that therefore his sufferings are my sufferings and his happiness is my happiness.⁷

The reality of oppression and the necessity for liberation become evident through religious experience. The Divine-human encounter creates a consciousness for the social order.

Religious experience and liberation are inseparable. Henri Nouwen states:

I am increasingly convinced that conversion is the individual equivalent of revolution. Therefore every real revolutionary is challenged to be a mystic at heart, and he who walks the mystical way is called to unmask the illusory quality of human society. Mysticism and revolution are two aspects of the same attempt to bring about radical change. No mystic can prevent himself from becoming a social critic, since in self-reflection he will discover the roots of a sick society. Similarly, no revolutionary can avoid facing his own human condition, since in the midst of his struggle for a new world he will find that he is also fighting his own reactionary fears and false ambitions.⁸

Second, in the search for meaning and purpose religious experience provides a lasting basis for creating a liberated world order. Out of this experience perspicuity for life's ultimates is acquired; in the presence of the Ultimate, one becomes acutely aware of ultimate things. The person seeks a commitment worthy of the knowledge acquired from the experience. Only by an appropriate response to the vision will the individual and corporate life find fulfillment. A commitment develops to bring a unity to the social order that corresponds to the sensation of unity from the religious experience. Society's broken harmony must be healed. Persons must be

⁶The term "mystical" specifies the type of religious experience referred to in this article. It is consistent with the definition given by Thurman; and it affirms, rather than negates, knowing the world.

⁷Walter T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics*. (New York: New American Library, 1960), pp. 26-27.

⁸Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1972), p. 19.

liberated from divisive (oppressive) systems, conditions, philosophies, and social patterns, and *reconciled* to their alienated brothers and sisters.

The particular mode of liberation may take many forms: politics, social work, education, community organizing, and other expressions that empower the oppressed. While the vision may not specify what actions should be taken, the response must honor the sensation of love experienced in the Divine encounter.⁹ This also means the gift of meaning and purpose must result in action. A complete response to the experience goes beyond feeling and insight, there must be loving care for others. Meister Eckhart says in a sermon:

. . . for what we plant in the soil of contemplation we shall reap in the harvest of action and thus the purpose of contemplation is achieved. There is a transition from one to the other but it is all a single process with one end in view — that God is, after which it returns to what it was before. . . . In contemplation, you serve only yourself. In good works, you serve many people.¹⁰

This leads to the third stage, that is, the need for power to engage in the liberation struggle. Religious experience ushers one to the source of all power. God's omnipotence assures that no force can overwhelm us. God's immediacy assures that the power we need is at hand.

Available is spiritual energy to sustain the commitment growing from religious experience. The commitment is re-examined, empowered, and directed by spiritual disciplines. Such disciplines as prayer, meditation, study, sacrifice, suffering, simplicity, solitude, fasting, and service ready the person for religious experience;¹¹ disciplines procure meaning and purpose from the experience that releases energy to deepen and express commitment. William James speaks of this release as a redirection:

It makes a great difference to a man whether one set of his ideas, or another, be the centre of his energy; and it makes a great difference, as regards any set of ideas which he may possess, whether they become central or remain peripheral in him. To say that a man is "converted" means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.¹²

Available is physical energy to revitalize the mind and body for service. A method must be employed to maintain physical strength and mental alertness commensurate with the activities of liberation. Often the fatigue of struggle so debilitates a community that it is willing to settle for lesser goals. Religious experience provides energy to meet the high calling and enormity of the challenge.

Unless rooted in religious experience, the work of liberation and reconciliation will never realize its potential. Religious experience enables the oppressed to *know* that power, the ability to achieve purpose, is with

⁹See Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1955), p. 258.

¹⁰Stace, *The Teachings*, p. 152.

¹¹The disciplines do not make or control the experience; the experience is a gift of God. Disciplines prepare one to receive and understand.

¹²William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 165.

them. They do not have to be propagandized into believing they have power; neither will it be necessary to comander and use the weapons of the oppressors; neither will the community wait in resignation for the intervention of others to bring their salvation. The presence of God assures and empowers.

Utilizing religious experience as the source of faith has its perils. Ecstasy may prove so satisfying to persons that they seek only to duplicate the feeling through meditation, worship, or contemplation; they become ahistorical and apolitical deciding that mystical experience is the only reality deserving their energies. Others, in self-realization, may lose the sense of interdependence with community, and seek personal salvation to the exclusion of any social concern. Even those who develop convictions for transforming the social order may misinterpret (wrong knowing) the implications of their religious experience; history is replete with atrocities that were inspired by religious vision. While for some the experience may be true but their understanding wrong, for others the experience itself must be called into question:

There is the story of St. Philip Neri (1515-1595) who used his sense of humor to point out the unreliability and ambiguity of experience. One day one of his followers came to tell him about a delightful vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which had elated and warmed him. St. Philip told him that the next time she appeared to him, he was to spit in her eye. When he did so, the devil's face was at once revealed!¹³

The threat of uncritical acceptance of religious experience should not, however, cause one to abandon realizing its significance to faith. *Any* effort to discern truth is vulnerable to human distortions. Religious experience does give a certainty, like no other method, about the identity to self and community, meaning in life, and the power to fulfill commitment.

In addition to being a source of faith, religious experience is an essential aspect of the black religious tradition.¹⁴ As Black Theology attempts to explicate the significant impulses of black religion, to inform its own construction, it has to deal with religious experience. Cone argues "There is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience."¹⁵ Religious experience is inherent to this context; Black Theology cannot afford to ignore or understate it.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF HOWARD THURMAN

Howard Thurman is the most prolific black religionist on religious experience. For over fifty years he has offered a word and ministry which express a deep commitment for remaking the social order. His work points to the inescapable fact that the destiny of the community is tied to the ability of individuals to have a "proper sense of self," and a proper sense of self is dependent upon religious experience. Thurman's thought offers important insights as to how religious experience is inexpressible to the

¹³Rachel Hosmer and Alan Jones, *Living in the Spirit*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 68.

¹⁴See Calvin E. Bruce, "Black Spirituality and Theological Method," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 3/2 (Spring 1976): 65-76.

¹⁵Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 17.

development of a theology which properly defines the humanity, political activity, and communal destiny of black people. His work is an important starting point for exploring how religious experience can be included in the ongoing development of Black Theology.¹⁶

Black Theology claims to: (1) reinterpret God's relationship to the poor and oppressed, and to proclaim His activity in their liberation, (2) radically interpret Jesus as one of the oppressed whose ministry was to them, (3) see the poor and oppressed as sources of revelation of what God is doing in the world, and (4) offer a new Christian witness, siding with the struggles of the poor and oppressed. After studying Thurman's theological development with these concepts, it becomes clear that his thought is a precursor to this theology. Years ahead of contemporary theologians Thurman had proclaimed and developed a religious philosophy based upon the above first three tenets of God's relationship to the disinherited.

Thurman begins his writing career by clarifying the meaning and purpose of the faith's central figure, Jesus. In 1935 his article "Good News for the Underprivileged" outlined the ideas which would later be more fully treated in his classic *Jesus and the Disinherited*.¹⁷ In these writings Thurman is attempting to define the religion of Jesus, and therefore be able to determine the essence of Christianity. He emphasizes the social circumstances of this poor and oppressed Jew, and then concludes that the religion of Jesus was a creative response which emerged from and dealt with transforming these conditions. Thurman is adamant in keeping Jesus as a member of the disinherited and not just as one who ministered unto them. Jesus was a victim of oppression; his message of deliverance was not from one who stood outside the suffering, but from one who was subject to it. His religion was the life saving resource for people who were poor, dispossessed, and oppressed; for people who were treated as aliens in their own land, who did not receive justice or any legal sanctions which recognized their right to decent and fair treatment; for people whose dignity and integrity fell under such violent assaults that they stood "with their backs against the wall."¹⁸ Jesus, Thurman believes, was giving the Jewish people a religious resource to save their sense of self and to help them begin experiencing the kingdom of God (community); the religion of Jesus is therefore a religion specifically aimed at empowering the disinherited.

¹⁶Utilizing Thurman in a discussion of Black Theology may seem inappropriate to some. Thurman does not organize his ideas into a systematic, yet he is a theologian in the truest sense of the word; his work is "discourse about God." And his social witness has been devoted to addressing the divisiveness of racial and cultural differences. His theology grows out of and speaks to the black condition in America. Any other requirements reflect a narrow conception of Black Theology, rather than a distortion of Thurman's thought.

Material in this section is more extensively developed in my dissertation, "An American Prophet: A Critical Study on the Thought of Howard Thurman" (Ph.D. dissertation, St. Louis University, 1979.).

¹⁷Howard Thurman, "Good News for the Underprivileged," *Religion in Life*, (Summer 1935): 403-409.

¹⁸Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), p. 7.

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The historical Jesus is essential to Thurman's theology. The activity of Jesus within his social environment provides crucial insights to understanding his meaning for humanity. Jesus is Christianity's exemplar because of the way he (being fully human) was able to reveal God's truth within and about the human condition; a truth which affirmed justice and righteousness, the dignity of all people, the necessity for love to rule all relationships, and the power of love to overcome evil and create community. Only when one embraces the historical Jesus (the Jesus of the poor with a message for the poor) are these political implications recognized as inherent in Christianity's essence. Through the historical Jesus, God's identification with and empowerment of the disinherited becomes evident.

Thurman then makes the analogy:

The striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who tarries long over the facts. We are dealing here with conditions that produce essentially the same psychology.¹⁹

The unique connection results in two major conclusions: (1) the socio-economic-political status of Jesus most closely corresponds to the socio-economic-political status of the American Negro; and (2) since Christianity is essentially a religion of and for the disinherited, it is appropriately a religion of and for the Negro. These conclusions completely upset a norm for much of American theology and religion which have assumed that Jesus' life and ministry more closely resembled the status and values of privileged white Americans.

Thurman reclaims the Jesus of and for the disinherited. This interpretation has profound implications for Christian race relations. In ignoring, oppressing, and killing blacks, American religionists have ignored, oppressed, and killed the group of people who uniquely reveal the truth of Jesus. Thurman writes:

How a man describes his belief in God when his life is serene and his place and position are safe and secure may differ radically from what he has to say when the storm is raging and the winds are wild and unrestrained. It is my conviction that what a man has to say about the meaning of God when he lives in a society which he largely controls and in which he is accepted may be quite different from what he has to say about the same God if he lives in a society in which he is always marginal and of no account. It is for this reason that I am convinced that the test of any religion, as far as its impact upon mankind is concerned, turns of what word does it have to share about God with men who are the disinherited, the outsiders, the fringe dwellers removed from the citadels of power and control in the society.²⁰

Whites can no longer relate to blacks as if they are their spiritual superiors whose role is that of missionary or mentor for blacks. Blacks have in the religion of Jesus a message which affirms their worth as inheritors of a truth about God's power and action. Whites can learn from and be evangelized by the spirituality which is found in the black religious experience; for God empowers the disinherited to create His community of love; God

¹⁹Ibid., p. 34.

²⁰Howard Thurman, "Introduction," *Why I Believe There Is A God: Sixteen Essays by Negro Clergymen*. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1965), p. xi.

reveals Himself in a special way to those who have no resource or recourse other than God to meet the harsh demands of life.

Thurman does not consider blacks spiritually superior to whites; they do not have an "elect" status before God. But blacks live under the kinds of circumstances where they have a different experience of God's love and power; they *know*, like no one else can know, how thoroughly God identifies with all their needs. It is this unique perspective that provides an understanding which usually escapes the privileged and anyone else who is insensitive to the plight of blacks. Suffering can yield spiritual insight and growth. It is therefore the American Negro, Thurman says, who offers a vital witness to the power, activity, and will of God; the Negro offers a vital witness to the expression of faith, hope, and love which are necessary for the creation of God's kingdom; the Negro offers a vital witness to the religion of Jesus, the essence of Christianity.

Howard Thurman uncovers evidence for his convictions about black Americans and religion in his interpretation of the Negro spirituals. The spirituals, says Thurman, are songs which communicate the sorrow and lament which the slaves felt for their condition, but they are also songs of protest against inhumane circumstances, and songs of comfort which enabled the slaves to endure tremendous suffering and indignities; comfort because the slaves had developed a *profound* theology which spoke to their existential situation. The slave songs did not just carry political, psychological, musical, or social responses to their condition, but a rich religious understanding of existence. Thurman rediscovers a theological tradition which has been ignored as making any contribution to America's religious heritage. In evaluating their importance he says:

For these slave singers such a view [that ultimate meaning was limited to one's immediate experiences in life] was completely unsatisfactory and it was therefore thoroughly and decisively rejected. And this is the miracle of their achievement causing them to take their place alongside the great creative religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, *worth living!*²¹

Thurman is one of the first writers to explicate the theological significance of these slave songs. His two books which are full treatments of Negro spirituals are *Deep River* (1945) and *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (1947).²² These creative contributions reveal the ability of the slaves to experience and understand the power of God as the ground of their life and hope. The slaves (the disinherited) had discovered that the heart of Christianity spoke lovingly to their condition; that the religion of Jesus provided a proper "sense of self," identifying them as children of God, as a people of ultimate worth.

Thurman's treatment of the spirituals indicates his interest in discovering religious and theological resources within the tradition of the Negro

²¹Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, originally separate books, but now in a single volume; *Deep River* was first published by Eucalyptus Press, 1945, and a revised edition by Harper and Brothers, 1955; *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* was first published by Harper and Brother, 1947; the new reprint edition of both books is (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1975), p. 135.

²²Ibid.

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folk. If God's truth is to and in the midst of the disinherited, then one should find evidence of His "word" dwelling among them; the spirituals are testimony to the presence of God's truth finding new expression through the faith of these oppressed people.

The search for the sources of a theology of God's relatedness to the oppressed must recognize the contributions of Howard Thurman. And it is to be remembered that religious experience is the informing source of Thurman's thought. His convictions about religious experience can be applied to the liberation stages (identity-relationship, meaning, power) discussed earlier. The basic process is as follows:

1. The individual has a sense that he or she is being encountered and loved in a personal and private way; a way which affirms one's ultimate worth as a child of God.²³
2. The experience provides the "confidence of ultimate security." As Thurman states, "the human spirit is exposed to the kind of experience that is capable of providing an ultimate clue to all levels of reality, to all the dimensions of time, and to all aspects of faith and the manifestations therein."²⁴
3. The experience of God gives life a new focus, a new sense of commitment. The subject realizes that only a life fully surrendered to God can experience meaning, security, and hope. God becomes the Absolute to which the life is given.²⁵
4. The new life commitment (conversion) changes the character and habits of the person. Emotionally, spiritually, and physically the individual experiences more power to respond to the demands of life. The release of this power gives the individual an awareness of his/her potential for fulfillment, for love. The urge to be "Godlike" (perfect) transforms the personality to expressing fuller meanings of love.²⁶
5. In expressing the fuller meanings of love, the subject seeks to change the social order. "In his effort to achieve the good he [the mystic] finds that he must be responsive to human need by which he is surrounded, particularly the kind of human need in which the sufferers are victims of circumstances over which, as individuals, they have no control, circumstances that are not responsive to the exercise of an individual will however good and however perfect."²⁷
6. The transformation of the self and the social order discloses community (salvation). A life which responds to the vision of God (religious experience) will establish the kind of relationships where

²³Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, p. 30.

²⁴Ibid., p. 30.

²⁵Ibid., p. 65.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 40 and 75.

²⁷Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," *Eden Theological Seminary Bulletin* IV (Spring Quarter 1939): 30.

God is experienced more and more; where the underlying unity of reality becomes the (immediate) environment in which society finds itself.²⁸

Thurman believes that the Christian has in Jesus the example of how mysticism informs the good life, the life which finds fulfillment from religious experience. He interprets Jesus' baptism event as one which triggered mystical consciousness. The event set in motion the process which has just been outlined:

1. Jesus had the personal sense of being God's child. He heard a voice from heaven say, "Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11)
2. Jesus rushed into the desert to understand the new commitment his life must take. In the desert he was confronted with temptations to betray his vision. Jesus emerged from these temptations with a deeper sense of God as the ultimate source of his well-being, the ultimate source of order through the natural laws, and the ultimate source for righteousness. Jesus knew God as the ground of life.²⁹
3. The experience of self and God led to a new life's commitment. Jesus began his ministry, a ministry which continuously attested to the fact that life must be surrendered to God.
4. Power came to Jesus. In his presence people were healed of the limited lives they had lived. Jesus recognized that his power was of God; in expressing this power, he allowed God to be manifested through him.
5. The religion of Jesus aimed at changing the social order; it not only gave the "disinherited" a survival technique, but a new sense of power of love which is able to transform all things.
6. The disciples, and the lives of people he encountered, became Jesus "test group" where he was able to see the ability of love to form community. Jesus' claims for the establishment of a new kingdom were testimony to his faith in the destiny of love to rule relationships.

The process conveys how religious experience, in its profoundest expression, is not just a personal experience of ecstasy, but a source for social transformation. And in recognizing its significance to Jesus, the faith's central figure, it is recognized as essential to Christianity. Religious experience is a source for theology and religion, particularly Christianity. And religion is the conduit for realizing full community.

Religion, for Thurman, is not orthodoxy or political theology, but the all-embracing spiritual dimension of life which commits the individual to worship of and service for God. The religious life is the ethical life, but it is

²⁸Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, pp. 123-124.

²⁹Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1961), pp. 54-58.

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also more; for life is not assessed just on the human condition and human values, but on its relationship to God's judgment. Thurman says that when this happens, "things are no longer merely ethical or unethical, they are sinful or righteous — a religious quality appeared in morality."³⁰ Spirituality does not just consider the "oughtness" (ethics) of helping to form community, but the fact that participation in this labor enables one to experience God. Service to others yields religious experience; social change can possibly make the opportunity for religious experience available to those who find their energies siphoned in securing themselves against a hostile environment.³¹ All situations are perceived as encouraging or preventing religious experience; life is described as supporting or opposing the spiritual journey. Here ultimate meaning is read into social, economic, and political structures; they are not just responsible to local or national or international standards, but to God's concern for unity. Thurman can therefore make the statement that segregation and discrimination at their root are the presence of evil in the human spirit. This is a significant analysis by Thurman in that it makes the treatment of blacks an important criterion by which the spiritual health of a people is judged. Racism, therefore, is not just immoral or unlawful or unjust, but sinful and an affront to God. This designation makes race relations an ultimate concern for religion.³²

Howard Thurman challenges Christians to bring their faith to bear on race relations. This is not only necessary for resolving racial problems, but for Christianity to contain a religious quality. Thurman asserts that Christianity is only religious insofar as it gives a person the sense of his/her ultimate meaning and value; this means that the faith must be actively involved in transforming American society so that racial barriers, which prevent true assessments of worth, are destroyed.³³

Thurman believes that social change in America requires revolution. This revolution is not a matter of overthrowing the government or violent acts against the powerful, but is a radical commitment and act to create an environment where all persons are respected and cared for. It is a revolt against all values, systems, security, privilege, and structures which support injustice and separateness. Perhaps, a revolution more threatening and difficult than political activity.

Liberation is an important concept in Thurman's thought. His means of liberation differ from those acceptable to James Cone; for Thurman, only nonviolent actions are permissible in the liberating struggle. For liberation's purpose is reconciliation, and reconciliation can only be accomplished through a loving (nonviolent) means. Though one may argue with his convictions about nonviolence, the emphasis on reconciliation should not be missed. It is a major theme of Black Theology developed by

³⁰Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," p. 23.

³¹Ibid., p. 31.

³²Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 89-90.

³³Ibid., p. 101.

J. Deotis Roberts. Thurman's commitment to reconciliation characterizes his approach to the fourth tenet of Black Theology mentioned earlier, that is: to "offer a new Christian witness, siding with the struggles of the poor and oppressed." His "Christian witness" entails not only an exodus from oppression, but reconciliation between oppressor and oppressed where dominance no longer characterizes the relationship, and a creative fellowship develops where persons discover their kinship and interdependence. Any goal of liberation which falls short of this kind of reconciliation will fail to manifest the Oneness of God. *It will fail to represent the unifying vision of religious experience.* It will fail to express God's will for community.

COMMUNITY AND SPIRITUALITY

Liberation and reconciliation are crucial activities in the establishment of God's Kingdom (community). Religious experience is the vital medium that informs and energizes these activities. Liberation and reconciliation are not just a matter of altering the structures and policies of social, economic, and political life. Spiritual dispositions undergird these structures and policies. If persons are *alienated* from their identity and relatedness to others, if *meaninglessness* prevents making life commitments, and if the feeling of *impotence* causes resignation to the present order, then *despair* will permeate every thought and action. The vision of God's Kingdom will be thought a lunatic's fantasy, certainly not applicable to reality. Unless spiritual dispositions are addressed, community will be established on a precarious foundation. Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized this when he wrote:

The ultimate solution to the race problem lies in the willingness of men to obey the unenforceable. Court orders and federal enforcement agencies are of inestimable value in achieving desegregation, but desegregation is only a partial, though necessary, step toward the final goal which we seek to realize, genuine intergroup and interpersonal living. Desegregation will break down the legal barriers and bring men together physically, but something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right. . . . These dark and demonic responses [fear, prejudice, pride, and irrationality] will be removed only as men are possessed by the invisible inner law which etches on their hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation.³⁴

Without a sense of inner authority, persons are dependent upon (slaves to) law, might, and custom. Religious experience resources a spirituality that affirms one's inner authority. The person knows, not told what to believe about, the Ultimate of all that is; and the person knows he/she is loved and empowered.

The Divine-human encounter authorizes one to accept the full measure of their worth and fact of kinship to others, the challenge of a divinely inspired calling, and response-ability. The oppressors need this to relinquish the idolatry which has secured their perverted status; a status which stands against community and therefore against God. The oppressed need it to realize fully the purpose for which they were created. Lerone Bennett, Jr.,

³⁴Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 100-101.

Black Theology and Religious Experience

senior editor of *Ebony* magazine, relates the welfare of black Americans to a consciousness of spiritual identity. In an editorial entitled "The Crisis of the Black Spirit," Bennett assesses the present situation of black youth and bemoans: the homicide which blacks have committed against one another, their improper sense of self, the absence of respect for others, the loss of direction, high moral values, and hope, the refusal to struggle for achievement, and the absence of a disciplined life which leads to excellence. Bennett articulates the severity of the "crisis" as follows:

The danger is real and pressing. For the first time in our history, the inner fortresses of the Black Spirit are giving away. For the first time in our history, we are threatened on the level of the spirit, on the level of our most precious possession, on the level of the soul.

And what this means is that we are threatened today in this country as we have never been threatened before. A Great Black Depression and policies of malign neglect are eroding the material foundations of our communities, and the fallout from this is eroding the moral and spiritual foundations of Black culture.

... To come right out with it, *we are losing a whole generation of people*. And this fact, which is cultural, political and economic at the same time, constitutes the gravest challenge we have faced in this country since the end of slavery.³⁵

Religious experience meets the crises of the spirit; it brings a perspective on the verities of life. When the self encounters God, all pretense of self-sufficiency and self-centeredness (improper sense of self) disappears. Our deepest needs (identity-relationship, meaning, power) cry out, and only the assurance of God's love will satisfy. And the assurance of this love is most real when it is experienced.

Again, there are no guarantees against person misinterpreting the experience and perverting its significance. Even more the reason for black theologians to give thorough attention to the nature and implications of religious experience. Standing inside the oppressed community they should be most sensitive to its function with the tradition, current situation, and destiny of black people. Otherwise, interpretation is forfeited to charlatans and persons who may be well meaning, but less prepared to address the community's needs.

Just as the theologian's credibility is enhanced by his/her involvement with the oppressed community, so the theologian's encounter with God authenticates his/her treatise on religious experience. Religious experience should not be a subject of the theologian, the theologian needs to be a subject of religious experience. When discourse about God is informed by religious experience, theology becomes a spiritual discipline: a way to test and give expression to the personal and social implications of religious experience. Discourse which tells what God is doing in the community's life. Out of his/her encounter a theologian realizes the inadequacy of words to convey fully the knowledge received. But truth must be spoken, even with the limitations of language. The mind will not be denied its probing, ordering, interpreting method for seeking truth and expressing love of God. Feeling and reason cooperate in formulating a theology that encompasses self, community, and God. The theologian's spirituality becomes a source for his/her contribution to the community's pilgrimage.

³⁵Jerome Bennett, Jr., "The Crisis of the Black Spirit," *Ebony*, October 1977, p. 142.

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Spirituality, the theologian's and others, is a labor on behalf of the community to discern and address the spiritual crises that prevent liberation and reconciliation. Community is the proving ground for spirituality. Community members assess its validity in light of *their own experience*. They ask such questions as: What does our history reveal about this particular insight? How is this truth conditioned by our place and time? Is it compatible with our religious vision? Does it liberate and reconcile? Does it glorify the God we have come to know? Spirituality identifies and resources the community; community discloses the presence, power, and love of the Spirit. Together they embrace, question, experiment, and evaluate to discover the Truth of religious experience. A Truth to know, proclaim, and serve. A Truth worthy of our lives. A Truth which is our hope and eternal salvation.