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## Howard Thurman: Literary/Humanist Theologian

Christian Theology is not the logical defense of rigid doctrines, but the continuing labor to comprehend the whole range of life, and to act with wisdom and holiness.

Mary Mcdermott Shideler, Consciousness of Battle,  
An Interim Report on a Theological Journey (1970)

Examining the works and life of Howard Thurman, one cannot avoid reminiscences of other persons who have uniquely combined philosophy, literature, and religion. He calls to mind those persons to whom Roland Frye refers as Christian humanists, such as Augustine, Dante, Erasmus, Zwingli, Melancthon, Calvin, Luther, Milton, Sydney, and Johnson, who exercised a "conscious Christian approach to literature, philosophy, and other humanistic disciplines." As Frye describes their approach as not necessarily being that of philosophical humanism<sup>1</sup> (for their professions differed and they represented diverse philosophical leanings), the same may be said of Thurman. There is some question as to whether he has systematically represented any facet of literature, philosophy, or religion. Though he has a system of his own and he has developed systematically over his life-span of seventy-nine years, one may not be able to place him safely within either of these three disciplines. Admittedly, he was a theologian, philosopher and clergyman by profession; yet to typify him as such occasions some difficulty. So, allowance will have to be made for him and his works to establish their own place or create their own system. Certain characteristics he does have in common with existing systems and trends, but he is, on the other hand, distinctly different from those. His most outstanding trait is mysticism; yet, he is not simply a mystic, and this study will not concentrate merely on that aspect of his character.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland M. Frye, Perspective on Man (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 13-14.



*I. Character and Classification*

Some background needs to be brought forth at this point. As a theologian and professor of theology, Thurman has written more than twenty books, published more than two hundred taped messages, given numerous lectures at home and abroad, and established and pastored a church representative of this theological perspective. Born in Daytona Beach, Florida, he received his secondary education at the Florida Baptist Academy, his A.B. degree from Morehouse College in 1923, and his B.D. from Colgate Rochester Divinity School in 1925. As a Kent Fellow at Haverford College he studied under the mystic scholar Rufus Jones. From 1923 to 1944, he was professor of Systematic Theology and Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University. In 1944 he founded the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples located in San Francisco and pastored it until 1953. From 1953 to 1964, he served as Dean of Marsh Chapel, Boston University, where he also taught in the school of theology.<sup>2</sup> He was Dean Emeritus of Marsh Chapel before his death on April 10, 1981.

Though he has been acclaimed as one of the twelve "Great Preachers" of this century,<sup>3</sup> the BBC has filmed a documentary of his life,<sup>4</sup> and *Ebony* has done a feature article on him as the "Twentieth Century Holy Man,"<sup>5</sup> Thurman has not yet been awarded his rightful place in American culture. He has not been appropriately classified. The chief focus of his profession being in theology, no one has seen fit to claim him as a literary figure even though he has written much poetry and all of his writings and speeches have a rather penchant literary quality. Though a theologian, he is not a scientific one. His writings reflect upon every element of Christian theology, but his is not mainly reflection from without but from within, and he does not view theology apart from lived experience. He uses the literary approach to the traditional elements of Christian theology. He may be considered among those religious thinkers of our day "inside and outside of traditional theological circles," who Daniel C. Noel says "are turning back toward forms of expression and conceptualization which lie 'behind' theology conventionally contrived, closer to its sources in the lived experience and of faith."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps he belongs to the gray area between literature and theology, for his is most of the time the literary mind at work on lived experience and imaginative

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<sup>2</sup> These facts were distilled from the Program on the occasion of Dr. Thurman's visit as a Lecturer at Morehouse College on November 16, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> *Life* (6 April 1953).

<sup>4</sup> British Broadcasting Corp., *The Life and Thought of Howard Thurman*.

<sup>5</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Howard Thurman: Twentieth Century Holy Man," *Ebony* (February, 1978), 68ff.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel C. Noel, "Retrenchment in Religious Thought: Christian Parabolic Theology, Post-Christian Poetic Para-Theology," *JAAR* 43, No. 4 (1975), p. 779.



experience, interpreting and depicting it in a theological framework. Or he may be called a creative or aesthetic theologian, for his sermons are creative literary pieces; his prayers and meditations are poetic reflections; and he has written much poetry. It may be that Thurman has achieved what Heinrich Ott proposed, "an understanding of systematic theology" that corresponds "to the Heideggerian perspective of thinking and speaking, resulting in a "translation of theological discourse from the classical grammar of Western metaphysics to a mode of speaking and thinking that is commensurate with the poet's response to primary being (Heidegger's 'fundamental ontology')." Then again, his work may be classified as what Stanley Hopper calls *theo-poiesis*<sup>7</sup> and Sallie TeSelle envisions as "intermediary" or "parabolic" theology,<sup>8</sup> where there is the attempt to unite form and content.

I would like to focus this study on two predominant traits in Thurman's works—the literary and the humanistic—as these tend to color and give shape to the central theological subject of conversion as he views it. The concept of conversion, which he shares essentially with most other traditional Protestant theologians such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Karl Barth, flowers, takes shape, and grows to maturity within his own life's process which we see reflected, and depicted vividly at times in seven of his books published from 1951 to 1971. In Thurman, this process takes on a peculiar quality of its own, which in so many ways sheds light on the process in others. It becomes his own personal quest, a kind of spiritual odyssey, and as it moves along with deep ponderings on the theologian's own life, on the life and experiences of Christ, on the problems of man in appropriating the Christian experience for himself, on the existential problems of man, we realize that this is more than Thurman's own personal quest. His own life becomes parabolic, in the sense of Sallie TeSelle's definition of the journey of man from spiritual awakening to spiritual fulfillment. And man's spiritual strivings are depicted in Thurman as though man is a character in a literary drama or fiction which is in many ways analogous to Northrop Frye's "total quest-myth," having episodes of romance, tragedy, irony, and comedy.<sup>10</sup> The hero, metaphorically, Thurman himself, displays overtones of both the high and the low mimetic.<sup>11</sup> In one respect, Thurman's intellectual and spiritual odyssey moves, through the seven books,

<sup>7</sup> Stanley R. Hopper, "The Poetry of Meaning," in Giles B. Gunn, ed., *Literature and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> Noel, p. 78

<sup>9</sup> Sallie TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 215.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.



as does the traditional plot of fiction. The hero becomes aware of a problem in his existence, and he strives to overcome it. As he does so, complications, conflicts, struggles arise; and the drama moves toward a climax and a denouement. I would suggest that the initial action is triggered in Thurman's first book, Deep Is The Hunger (1951); develops progressively but with complications in the next three, Meditations of the Heart (1953), The Creative Encounter (1954), and The Growing Edge (1956); proceeds toward and reaches its climax in The Inward Journey (1971) and Disciplines of the Spirit" (1963); and culminates in a denouement in The Search for Common Ground (1971). All along the way, we can see that, as Sallie TeSelle says, Jesus is the "Parable of God,"<sup>12</sup> Thurman gives a parabolic interpretation of the semi-conscious spiritual quest of the humanistic Christian. Before examining this quest, we must look at what his concept of conversion is, since that experience is the journey's motif.

Thurman's concept of conversion is best expressed in The Creative Encounter,<sup>13</sup> where he refers to it as an encounter with God. This encounter is creative in that it is not a single, final event, but a continuous, recurrent, expanding activity between the person and God throughout a lifetime. He describes the experience as the "finding of man by God and the finding of God by man" (p. 39). In it God meets the individual at the level of the individual's own needs and at the level of his "residue of God-meaning" and goes forward from there (p. 27). However, a volitional element is always present. He sees the self as active in the encounter, not passive. Prayer is the central means by which the self is involved. Conversion, for Thurman, as it was for Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, is rebirth, regeneration, transformation. In it a "new center is found, and it is often like giving birth to a new self" (p. 41). Contrary to popular evangelical notions, he stresses the apparent likelihood of periodic recurrence: "There need not be only one single rebirth, but again and again a man may be reborn until at last there is nothing that remains between him and God" (p. 40). Self-revelation and subsequent changes occur in one's life. Gradual shifts in one's total pattern takes place as a result of one's "constant exposure of his life to God" (pp. 41-42).

## *II. Early Stages of Thurman's Conversion-Odyssey*

With this general statement in mind, we may proceed to look at how this discursive concept works itself out parabolically in Thurman's own life and quest as represented successively in each of the seven books listed. The encounter, or initial action, begins for him in Deep Is the

<sup>12</sup> TeSelle, pp. 78, 82.

<sup>13</sup> Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1954.



Hunger,<sup>14</sup> subtitled Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness. Written during his tenure as pastor of Fellowship Church (1944-1953) this book depicts his intense search for spiritual meaning, understanding, and realization, not simply in his own life apart, but in his life in conjunction with other lives, in the church, in the social order, in the life of man. In the early pages, he ponders:

History is not irrational; it has a deep logic and consistency. God is the God of history. He does not stand apart as some mighty spectator but is in the process and the facts, ever shaping them (in ways that we can understand and in ways beyond our powers to grasp). (p. 2)

This reflection on history is reminiscent of Augustine, and it is certain that Augustine has influenced him greatly. In fact, a few pages later he quotes his famous line from the Confessions: "Thou hast made us for thyself and our souls are restless til they find their rest in Thee" (p. 5). It is probably not incidental that in the the early pages of this first book which signals the beginning of his own conversational odyssey he quotes from the opening page of the book that describes the same type of experience that started Augustine on his meaningful Christian journey. Thurman goes on to ponder deeply such questions as the problem of human understanding and relationships to one's fellowmen, "man's long march to the City of God" (p. 31, allusion to Augustine), fate and destiny, the dignity of man, Christian love, faith, and the like subjects. In this volume, one sees strong influences of Buddhist and Hindu mysticism as well.

In regard to human understanding and fellowship, he questions superficiality and lack of imagination: "We can be so earnest and sincere in our grim determination to be brotherly that we are completely unmindful of the effect of our actions on those whom it is our greatest desire to understand" (p. 23). He sees bad taste in many heavy and serious efforts to be helpful, and declares: "Human understanding requires great artistry; the touch of the artist may be light, but it is sure" (pp. 23-24).

In this early stage Thurman's humanistic tendencies stand out sharply in this first book. For instance, he ponders the dignity of man:

There is an essential dignity in human life, yes in all of life, that must some how be asserted from within, or else life is stripped of any true significance. In religious terms, this essential dignity is the basis of reverance and is the symbol of the divine life.

(pp. 36-37).

One sees here the tension between the human and the divine evident in Thurman's early religious struggles, which builds to a high point in this volume. There may in fact be some question as to whether he ever really

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<sup>14</sup> New York: Harper & Row, 1951.



overcomes his humanistic tendencies, for there seems to appear always in his writings and lectures a rather delicate balance between the two pulls in his spiritual life, and one may say that he almost tips the scale toward the humanistic.

These dialectical problems are seen clearly in the meditations in divisions II ("A Sense of Self") and III ("A Sense of Presence") of this book. At one point in division II, he states, "There must be also a developed sense of self. This is important because it is only on such a basis that the dignity of man, the individual, can be restored" (p. 62). But such ideas must not lead to the extreme. Thus he counters this later with: "It is small wonder that all religions that are ethically sensitive place a great emphasis upon the corrosive effects of pride upon the human spirit. There is something very subtle about pride and arrogance of spirit" (p. 67). Doubtless, he is speaking from his own personal experience here. One poem he writes in division III depicts his own struggle:

All night I lay across my bed—  
 No rest—no sleep;  
 Nought but the utter agony  
     of despair.  
 I cried to God—  
 The answer: Bald, awful silence.

Along the walk outside my  
     window  
 A group of men—  
 Students in a Southern school—  
     return  
 From breakfast.

Suddenly, as if in answer to my  
     all night cry,  
 They wooed the silence into song:  
 "I'm so glad trouble don't las' always,  
 O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?" (p. 150)

At least momentary resolution of the tension between the divine and the human is expressed in this rather ecstatic prose-piece that reflects his high literary imagination:

Whenever the mind of man has been uplifted; whenever I have frustrated the temptation to deny the truth within me, or to betray a value which to me is significant; whenever I have found the despair of my own heart and life groundless; whenever my resolutions to be a better man have stiffened in a real resistance against some form of disintegration; whenever I have been able to bring my life under some high and holy purpose that gives to it a greater wholeness and a greater unity; whenever I have stood in the presence of innocence, purity, love, and beauty and found my own mind chastened and my whole self somehow challenged and cleansed; whenever for one swirling moment I have glimpsed the distinction between good and evil courses of conduct, caught sight of something better as I turned to embrace something worse; whenever these experiences or others like them have been mine, I have seen God, and



felt His presence winging near. (p. 145)

His struggles continue, however, with his considerations of the Beautitudes, The Lord's Prayer, and his personal weaknesses and sins. He concludes the book with a number of poems which portray the divine-human dialectic that troubles his spiritual growth throughout this early stage. The struggle consists of a process of questions and discovery as he attempts to appropriate the Christian ideals in his own life, and to see them at work in relation to himself and others. For instance, he examines the Beautitudes by writing little prose reflections pondering their meanings. Of the one referring to the "poor in spirit," he says, "Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Theirs is the rule of God," and he explains: "When I know that I have not experienced in all my parts the rule of God and yet the rule of God in my life is the center around which my life moves, I am poor in spirit" (p. 185). In pondering the call for meekness, he cautions against it being used as a form of radical deception, a device for getting one's own way (p.187). A favorite phrase which he uses here (and adopts for use throughout his life) to punctuate the intensity of his battle is taken from Psalm 139 (his most cherished biblical passage <sup>18</sup>): "Search me, O God! Search me!" (p. 187)

This effort to bring the humanistic self under the mastery of God is further depicted in his consideration of phrases from The Lord's Prayer. For instance, he says of "Thy will be done," "The will of God is native to my spirit. It is the fundamental character of me. It is the foundation of my mental, physical, and spiritual structure. It is what I find when I am most myself. It is what I find when I get down to the deepest things in me. It is what is revealed when all the superficial things are sloughed off and I am essentially laid bare" (p. 193). This intellectual insight seems profound, but it is not enough to accomplish the fact of total self-surrender, to enable him to accept God's will as his own will in every phase of active life. Not enough to actualize in him the truth of his own reflection that "When I come to myself, I am aware of the will of God as part of and parcel of what it is that I seek above all else" (pp. 193-194). Presumably, the "self" spoken of here is not the old self or "old man," in the Pauline manner of speaking, but the "new man." Yet, Thurman does not deal with such fine distinctions.

Continuing with the phrase, "Deliver me from Evil," he examines within himself the problems of evil in his own body and spirit; with dietary problems, fears, anxiety, worry, inadequacy. Here again the tension between the human and the divine is evident as he talks of failures when he is depending "too utterly" on his own strength: "I forget to remember

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Yates, Howard Thurman: Portrait of a Practical Dreamer, (New York: The John Day Co., 1964).



that God is my strength and the source of the power without which nothing is possible" (p. 198). Once again this insight is intellectual, and the pride of the man, the human, is prevalent in the spirit. The humanist struggle continues. Being finally unable to resolve this tension, the author ends this first book with a series of poems which depict the workings of both the human and the divine and the enjoyment of the quest for spiritual fulfillment and for harmony between the two qualities in him. Some of the titles of the poems are reflective of these facts: "I Let Go of my Accumulations," "I Accept the Good in Myself," "O God, I Need Thee," "Let Go of Everything but God." The first one celebrates and portrays the initial surrender that takes place in the conversion experience. It may be described as a poetic depiction of a climactic phase of conversion. Therefore, it is necessary to quote it entirely:

I Let Go of My Accumulations

My ego is like a fortress.  
 I have built its walls stone by stone  
 To hold out the invasion of the love of God.  
 But I have stayed here long enough. There is light

Over the barriers, O my God—  
 The darkness of my house forgive  
 And overtake my soul.  
 I relax the barriers.  
 I abandon all that I think I am,  
 All that I hope to be,  
 All that I believe I possess.  
 I let go of the past,  
 I withdraw my grasping hand from the future,  
 And in the great silence of this moment,  
 I alertly rest my soul.  
 As the sea gull lays in the wind current,  
 So I lay myself into the spirit of God.  
 My dearest human relationship,  
 My most precious dreams,  
 I surrender to His care.  
 All that I have called my own  
 I give back. All my favorite things  
 Which I would withhold in my storehouse

From his fearful tyranny,  
 I let Go.  
 I give myself  
 Unto thee, O my God. Amen.  
 (pp. 201-202)

Yet, this is not final surrender. The poem that follows that one is indicative of varying returns to the humanistic. It may be interpreted as celebrating the beauty and aesthetic achievements of man, the love of self, and other humanist tendencies that help perpetuate the struggle. (But at



the same time there may be some question as to whether the surrender described above is a cause of the state of mind achieved in this poem.) It is titled, "I accept the God in Myself," and also must be quoted in the full:

There have been times when things of beauty  
 Have stirred me deeply—  
     Sunlight pouring into a city alleyway,  
     Moonlight upon the water of a still lake.  
 That in me which responds to beauty  
 I recognize. This I love.  
 For the beauty which unites  
     I am thankful.

There have been times when something in me  
 Has stopped my telling of an untruth  
 Or the exaggerating of the facts.  
 That in myself and in my fellows  
 Which desires truth, I reverence and love.  
     I love myself.

I stop to reflect upon the finest acts  
 Ever performed by any of the persons I have known.  
 That in them which caused these acts  
 I reverence. I remember at once  
 When something in me has caused such a creative  
 and whole-hearted act  
 That I was amazed at my own goodness. This I love.  
 For the total of all the good acts  
 Performed throughout history  
     I give thanks.

At first glance, this poem may seem most acceptable and not the least offensive to the Christian sense of commitment to God. But looked at more closely in terms of the theological problems concerning nature and grace, it could make for a sticky theological debate.<sup>16</sup> It focuses on God's creations rather than on God himself, on the natural goodness of man, that in man which enables him to rise to heights of artistic achievement. Where Thurman here says, "I was amazed at my goodness," St. Paul says, "Yet not I, but Christ in me."

The next poem seems to reflect the continued battle with denying self. It is titled, "Let Go of Everything but God." and it starts out with the pronouncement, "I must let go." Further on it broods, "I live under the shadow of being supplanted by another." And it ponders, "I must let go of pride. But—What am I saying? Is there not a sense of pride/That supports and sustains all achievements/Even the essential dignity of my own personality?" (p. 205) This poem expresses a kind of humanist puzzle as the author queries: "I must let go everything but God./But

<sup>16</sup> L. Baird Tipson, Jr., The Development of a Puritan Understanding of Conversion (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1972), pp. 12-18.



God—May it not be/That God is in all the things to which I cling?/  
That may be the hidden reason for my clinging. It is very puzzling indeed. (p. 205) The poem concludes with the tension unresolved and the author's plea for God's help: "Teach me, O God, how to free myself of dearest possessions/So that in my trust I shall find restored to me/All I need to walk in Thy path and to fulfill Thy will" (p. 206).

Other poems express the notion that there has been some progress in the struggle, some spiritual growth, but the process is not complete. There is confidence in the fact that God is working in him to bring about the necessary changes: "There are dangers which are now passed—I escaped: how/I do not know" (p.207); "The peace of God which Passeth All understanding, shall Guard My Heart and Thoughts" (208); "God is not through with me"; "What I would be and am not yet, reassures me/Through my innermost self I find my way to God" (p. 211).

Before moving on to an examination of the other books and higher stages of Thurman's spiritual quest, it is necessary to pause for an analysis and qualification of the author's literary/humanistic tendencies as a theologian, which seem to be most evident in his early book. For though literary qualities are commonly accepted as admirable in theologians, the humanistic is a questionable, controversial element in theological thinking.

### *III. Qualifications of the Literary/Humanistic Tendencies*

As we look at the humanistic element, it is interesting, on the one hand, to see how Thurman differs, in his conceptions of it as a Christian theologian, from other more systematic theologians. On the other hand, we shall see how he relates to the Christian humanist of the more philosophical bent. As already indicated, Thurman's spiritual struggle with the human element in him is a reflection of the Augustinian controversy over the theological problems of nature and grace. It is not easy to determine, but even though Thurman places great stress on man's own actions in the conversion process, it is hardly likely that he would side with Pelagius in declaring man's will to be totally free and God's grace to be external.<sup>17</sup> What is more likely is that Thurman would be in agreement with Augustine in insisting that God's grace is internal, working within man:

We must therefore avoid saying that the way in which God assists us to work righteousness and 'works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure' (Phil, 2:13), is by externally addressing to our faculties precepts of holiness; for he gives his increase internally (I Cor. 3:7), by shedding love abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost,

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.



which is given us (Rom. 5:5)<sup>18</sup>

Thurman would agree with Augustine in saying that God in his act of grace respects our nature and does not work salvation in us as though we were insensate stones, or creatures without will or reason. In not so defending grace as to destroy man's will and in not so asserting free will as to offend the grace of God,<sup>19</sup> Augustine propounded a theology that, I believe, would be largely acceptable to Thurman. There is a tenuous area of human free will reflected in Augustine which I think Thurman would accept; "There is however, always within us a free will,—but it is not always good; for it is either free from righteousness when it serves sin,—and then it is evil,—or else it is free from sin when it serves righteousness,—and then it is good. But the grace of God is always good; and by it it comes to pass that a man is of a good will, though he was before of a evil one."<sup>21</sup>

Certain phrases from Thurman's lecture will help clarify his presentation of the struggle between nature and grace in the life of a convert and affirm his basic agreement with Augustine. He stresses his uniqueness in this: "No one like me has ever been born. No one like me will ever be born again. My responsibility in my life is that I will not do anything to cause God to repent that He created me." He stresses his efforts to respond positively to God in an attempt "to find some way to yield the nerve center of my consent—the place where I say yes—to God." One's goal is to "surrender one's own true essence—that which when everything else is stripped away"—is irreducible. One yields to God the "power of veto and certification" over one's being. And he counters the notion with uncertainties which often accompany it: "I'm not sure that even God can be trusted with that kind of surrender, so that I yield the nerve center and then snatch it back." The struggle begins after the first surrender. Once you yield at your center, "This does not mean that the rest of you has heard about it. There are areas, little hamlets and villages in you where the word has not come yet. It is an entire life's struggle; over and over again, I bring the same to the altar and let my original commitment be purified."<sup>21</sup>

Thurman also has basic agreements with Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin, but he differs, as well, from them in delicate but significant ways. He would agree with Luther in saying that Christians are continually reliving their experience of inadequacy and their need for grace, and that

<sup>18</sup> *De Spiritu et Littera*, 35, 42, p. 101, quoted in Tipson, *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17n.

<sup>21</sup> Howard Thurman, Chapel Lecture, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Ga., Nov. 17, 1978, 11:00 A.M.



God is constantly killing the old man to be born.<sup>22</sup> However, Thurman would differ slightly on this last point, for he tends to grant a higher dignity to the "old man" that rejects being destroyed (as he stresses the gradual surrender, the noble holding back). His humanistic approach consists of the fact that he focuses the initial religious experience on man and his "hunger" or quest, and it is not always easy to determine at what points in the rest of the lifelong struggle for perfection, whether the initiative belongs to God or to man.

On the point of initiative, Thurman is probably more in agreement with Melancthon, though I am not sure he would endorse his position of predestination. Melancthon concluded that, "A sinner could be expected to take a good deal of initiative in his own conversion. God did not intend that sinners passively await His converting work; they were to pitch in and help the work along. He went further than Luther in allowing for cooperation between man and God."<sup>23</sup> Thurman is less in agreement with Calvin than with either of the other three. The severity of Calvin's insistence on the depravity of man would be unacceptable to Thurman. He would not agree that man's repentance is "induced by the fear of God" that "the depravity of our nature compels God to use severity in threatening us," nor that the obstinacy" in us "must be beaten down as with hammers."<sup>24</sup> Neither would Thurman accept Calvin's demand for "the destruction of the whole flesh, which is full of evil and of perversity."<sup>25</sup> For Thurman's consideration of the dynamic principles relating to the life of the Christian is of a much more sensitive nature than Calvin's in that Thurman, the artist is more sensitive toward the human predicament. And in this way, Thurman remains closer in agreement with Augustine in insisting on the "compatibility of man and God," a principle which "receded in the background of Calvin's understanding of nature and grace" (which he supposedly modeled after Augustine).<sup>26</sup>

#### IV. Thurman's Humanism

Significantly, Thurman is related to the philosophical Christian humanist tradition dating as far back as Erasmus, who in Renaissance times encouraged a return directly to the sources in order to learn true Christianity—<sup>27</sup> advice which informs Thurman's whole theological journey. As Erasmus counseled theologians against the systematic theology

<sup>22</sup> Tipson, pp. 40-41.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* III, 3, p. 599.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Tipson, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Abraham Friersen, "The Impulse Toward Restitutionist Thought in Christian Humanism," *JAAR*, 44, No. 1 (1976), 34.



during his time (Scholasticism) and encouraged them to learn the rules of grammar, rhetoric and poetry.<sup>28</sup> Thurman rejects the methods of the systematic theologians today and uses those of the literary artists. Though he does not stress moral reform in contemporary theology in any persistent way, as did the Christian humanists of Erasmus' time,<sup>29</sup> he actualizes this in his own life and focuses, as they did,<sup>30</sup> on the Sermon on the Mount and other key sources as central to genuine religious experience. Unlike Erasmus, however, Thurman did not remain within the traditional church and try to reform it,<sup>31</sup> but rejected it because of its narrow confinements and established his own, Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, where persons of all the world's religions and of all the Christian denominations were free to worship without undergoing an affront to their own personal religious beliefs—Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and any other groups.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Thurman may be related to the New Humanist Movement of nineteenth and twentieth century America, which sought a solution to the modern technological and materialistic man's inability to "supply direction and discipline for himself from within"<sup>33</sup> by seeking a replacement of the age's superficial spiritualism with a strenuous and disciplined inner faith. Philosophically, Thurman would agree with Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, who rejected the reductionism of the naturalist philosophers,<sup>34</sup> the tendency toward ethical relativism of the Romantics,<sup>35</sup> and the rationalism of the Neo-classicists<sup>36</sup>:

The strictly rational life was either too difficult or too boring. Man, the Humanist said, is driven ultimately to rise above or sink below the rational plane of existence. Here was the critical challenge to a Humanist program. The need was to supply the content of the higher spiritual life, to discover the elements of unity amid the flux of continuity in the human experience. And more important than reason was the imagination. The imagination must be an ally to reason against the direction of the lower self.

Properly exercised, reason and the imagination together would furnish insight into the permanent reality above the flux of nature, a discovery of the higher self which each individual shares as part of a common humanity, the elements of an enduring nature

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45

<sup>32</sup> Howard Thurman, The Creative Encounter (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), pp. 147-149.

<sup>33</sup> J. David Hoeveler, Jr., "The New Humanism, Christianity, and the Problems of Modern Man," JAAR, 42, No. 4 (1974), 659.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 661.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 660.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 663.



and the observable moral nature that is man's distinctively human trait.<sup>37</sup>

But unlike Babbitt, Thurman did not supply the content of the "higher spiritual life" with something less than a "supra-human or transcendent reality,"<sup>38</sup> because of a disaffection for dogmatic revealed religion. He took, rather, the same stance as More, who, rejecting the character and methods of the contemporary churches,<sup>39</sup> proposed for himself, and for others who find difficulties with traditional dogmas, a start with the "immediate data of experience."<sup>40</sup>

More inferred that 'inherent in my very nature as a man' is an ethical purpose, however faint it may appear, which is a call to 'shape my life and character' after a pattern or end (*telos*) of self-approval. More pointed to this condition as a given fact of experience in the internal life of each individual, not a principle of the reason, but, using Humanist vocabulary, a 'direct perception.' Every human being has an end, perceived through the moral sense, which he has the freedom and responsibility, also intuited, to fulfill.<sup>41</sup>

This kind of thinking enabled More to retain his Christian faith in conjunction with Humanist thinking. And his ideas are not far from those of Thurman's in the following declaration: "The most important thing that religious experience teaches us about God is that God is, immediate, direct knowledge, not inference from logic. The firsthand knowledge of God is always in the nature of revelation. It is an awareness of literal truth directly perceived."<sup>42</sup>

### V. The Heightened Quest

Returning to the quest theme, to Thurman's spiritual odyssey in search of spiritual fulfillment, we see that the other six books named earlier show definite progress in his growth. Meditations of the Heart is the second book in a kind of trilogy of books of meditations, the first being Deep is the Hunger, and the third, The Inward Journey. As we recall, Deep is the Hunger left off at a high point in Thurman's search for spiritual wholeness—his struggle, his "hunger," with the humanist-divine tension at its heights. The second book, Meditations of the Heart is reflective of another stage in his conversion-growth process. It symbolizes, even in the words of its title, taken from Psalm 19:14, the hunger or desire for God to invade the self more fully, and for the self to be shaped and moulded in a manner pleasing to God: "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 664.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 667.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 668.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 669.

<sup>42</sup> The Creative Encounter. pp. 45-46.



strength, and my redeemer." The metaphor, "The Inward Sea," introduces, sets the tone of, and dominates the book:

There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the 'angel with the flaming sword.' Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority. Nothing passes 'the angel with the flaming sword' to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of the 'fluid area of your consent.' This is your crucial link with the Eternal (p. 15).

The author proceeds on this inward search in which he produced one hundred fifty-two meditations (in five chapters), pondering every area of vital human spiritual life and developing thereby disciplined inner response to practically every phase of active life. All of these meditations are short, parabolic, well-constructed prose-pieces, self-contained artistic creations; and many are in the form of prose-poems or free-verse. "The Embattled Spirit," for instance, is a poem stressing the intense spiritual bout with pride on the long journey (pp. 54-55). "The Experience of Growing Up" is a poem describing metaphorically the spiritual growth process (pp. 94-96). Throughout, the author describes his own spiritual strivings and reflects on them, as well as on those of others. One example is "A Gracious Spirit":

I seek a gracious spirit in dealing with my own conflicts. It is often easy for me to be extremely hard on myself. Often I tend to give myself the disadvantage and wallow in blame and condemnation as distinguished from self-pity. It is a part of my pretense to be gracious in my spirit in dealing with conflicts at the point in which others are involved, but not with myself. Is this true, or is it just the reverse? Do I dare expose all my intent to the scrutiny of God and His wisdom in facing my own conflict? Again and again, I am aware that the Light not only illumines but it also burns. (p. 170)

In querying and querulous uncertainty, he searches for God and for His purification, for one thing, from within. In "I Surrender Myself to God," he says, "The central element in communion with God is the act of Self-surrender" (p. 175). In "God Searches Me," he expresses enduring satisfaction in the notion, "I am found of Him" (pp. 175-176). "Not We Ourselves" is a reflection on his battle with self-denial. For instance, he declares: "This is the secret of humility—I cannot be humble unless I have truly found something about which I must be humble. There can be no health in me, nothing but a sickening arrogance and stalking pride until my relation to God scales me down to size" (p. 177). "The Humble Spirit" speaks of learning the meaning of humility from the earth (p. 183). Others of the poems capture the essences and high points of the author's struggles: "Lord, Open Unto Me" (p. 188), "I Want To Be Better" (p. 183), "I Need Courage" (p. 194), "I Confess" (p. 195). The book winds to a close with the author "Surrounded by the Love of God" (p. 210), with his experiencing a measure of success in the struggle for release from self and a confident plea for God to stand by him:



To be aware that God is standing beside me calls for some measure of detachment from my own personal struggle and turmoil.

It is entirely possible that the Presence of God may be most acutely felt in and through the struggle and the turmoil. (p. 216)

### *VI. A Level Of Security*

The success of Thurman's inward search in these first books engenders in him a level of religious maturity whereby he is able to give in the third (*The Creative Encounter*), sound conceptualization of his understanding of the Christian experience of conversion. Here is his first complete statement and explication of conversion, the central or core experience of the Christian. At the same time it is Thurman's journey outward (by contrast), subtitled, "An interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness." The book contains no poetry, but consists of four chapter essays on: "The Inwardness of Religion," "The Outwardness of Religion," "The Inner Need for Love," and "The Outer Necessity for Love." The author thus sets forth a working definition (but not a technical interpretation of the meaning, definition, or place of religious experience for the satisfaction of the formal scholar of religious phenomena) of the religious experience as an encounter between God and man. In the first chapter, he examines prayer and human suffering as two disciplines which help prepare man for the encounter. In the second, he deals with the bearing that encounter has upon the personal, private context of meaning in which the individual lives and by which his life is defined. The third chapter treats of the relationship between the ordinary human need for love from the beginning of infancy and the grand fulfillment of the personality in the experience of the love of God. The last chapter discusses the outer necessity for love in the social relations which are part and parcel of the individual's experience of community (pp. 9-12). The book ends with the declaration:

It is my belief that in the Presence of God there is neither male or female, white nor black, gentile nor Jew, Protestant nor Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, nor Moslem, but a human spirit stripped to the literal substance of itself before God. Wherever man has this sense, of the Eternal in his spirit, he hunts for it, in home, among his friends, in his pleasures, and in all the levels of his function. It is my simple faith that this is the kind of universe that sustains that kind of adventure, and what we see dimly now in the churning confusion and chaos of our tempestuous times will someday be the common experience of all the children of men everywhere. (pp. 152-153)

To give expository expression to this higher level of knowledge gained is not sufficient for Thurman; he must give even more eloquent vent to it. Therefore, the fourth book, *The Growing Edge*, issues in a series of sermons celebrating that knowledge. It expounds such topics as, "The Enemy," "Love," "Prayer," "The Grace of God," "Peace," "Justice and Mercy," "Festivals," "The Eternal Light," and "The Christian Charac-



ter." In essence, it centers on process, the relation of all animate and inanimate life, the necessity of tension and struggle to growth, and the power of endurance in the face of suffering:

You will let what rides on the horizon constantly inform the event with which you are wrestling, until at last the event itself begins to open up, to yield, to break down, to disintegrate under the relentless pressure of some force which transcends the event and tutors and informs it. This is what the Resurrection is all about. (p. 179)

The book closes here with a reflection similar to concepts in Mercea Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal Return*<sup>43</sup>: "All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The birth of a child—life's most dramatic answer to death—This is the Growing Edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge" (p. 180).

#### *VII. A Return to the Source and Achievement of Wisdom*

The fifth book in this series is the third in the trilogy of meditations starting with *Deep Is The Hunger*. Having reached a plane of maturity in the third book of the theological journey being described in this study, where he gave sophisticated religious reflections, and having celebrated those in the sermons of the fourth, *The Growth Edge*; Thurman returns, possibly for renewal, to the inwardness of the search for wholeness in the religious experience in the writing of *The Inward Journey*, the fifth in this series and the third in the trilogy of meditations. It reflects his quest on a higher theological plane in a group of one hundred thirteen meditations under the headings, "The Quest for Meaning," "The Quest for Understanding," "The Quest for Fulfillment," "The Quest for Love," "The Quest for Peace," and "The Quest for God," as well as one under the heading, "Psalm 139." As we see, the quest moves to a broader scale more inclusive of mankind and the world. Once again there is a heavy concentration of poetry. Four poems reflect on the temptations of Jesus and the intensity and significance of the experience for Him: "Not By Bread Alone," "Thou Shalt Not Tempt God," "Thou Shalt Worship God," and *My God! My God!*. . . (pp.54-59). Thirteen poems, too numerous to name, reflect on phrases from the Hymn of Christian Love, the 13th chapter of I Corinthians (pp. 88-102). And ten poems illuminate phrases from the 139th Psalm (pp. 140-155). As can be seen, these poems examine key sources in the Scripture which shed light on the meaning, content and character of the mature religious experience. So,

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<sup>43</sup> Mercea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954). "For this mythical drama reminded men that suffering is never final; that death is always followed by resurrection; that every defeat is annulled and transcended by the final victory." p. 101.



at this stage the quest has heightened theologically, and we experience the climactic effect of it.

As The Creative Encounter culminates his first inward search, The Disciplines of the Spirit is the discursive counterpart to this climactic phrase of Thurman's journey. The ideas of earlier books are fitted into a kind of system that was in the making all along, and the two disciplines of the spiritual life discussed in book three, The Creative Encounter, "Suffering," and "Prayer," have been expanded to include three more, "Commitment," "Growing in Wisdom and Stature," and "Reconciliation," all of which are expounded respectively in five chapters of the book. The book constitutes a mature theological statement of the Christian experience of conversion-growth. Conversion, he now sees as an expression of the fundamental concern of all life for wholeness (p. 104). And he now sees the yearning and search he reflected on in the earlier book, Deep Is the Hunger, in its proper perspective:

When the hunger in man's heart merges with what seems to be the fundamental intent of life, communion with God the Creator of Life is not only possible but urgent. The hunger of the heart, which is part of the givenness of God, becomes one with the givenness of God as expressed in the world of nature and in human history (p. 95)

As this book is the climax of the spiritual odyssey, so The Search for Common Ground is the denouement of the story of the author's religious quest. In particular, it picks up on the theme in the final chapter of Disciplines of the Spirit, "Reconciliation," and builds it into a kind of system of process theology. Thurman himself admits that this book is a kind of fitting together of the pieces of his life's journey.

When I completed this manuscript, I was struck by the feeling that here I had set down the case in rather formal terms, for what reveals itself is my lifelong working paper. What is suggested and often stated in previous books, such as The Creative Encounter, Jesus and the Disinherited, and Footprints of a Dream, in the present volume comes full circle in a wider context, rooted in the life process itself. (p. xi)

This book reveals and underscores the fact that the journey has evolved from a concern with the author's own personal religious experiences to the religious experience and life of man, and finally to a concern for all of life. Some of these insights are keenly expressed. From an Indian chief in northwestern Canada he quotes: "I come from away up North near the arctic Circle. I am a part of the snow, ice, and wind in winter. These flow into me and I flow into them" (p. 83). He speaks this of the search for identity:

I begin with the obvious proposition that I am not alien to life. I am a creature grounded and rooted in creatureliness. Therefore, I am a part of the life process rather than being an isolate within it. Truly, I am a space binder: as I described earlier, my body participates completely in the life process and it is nourished and sustained by ancient processes as old as life, and set in motion before any awareness or knowledge about them was in evidence. (p. 78)



Clearly, the humanistic struggles and problems with the ego that characterized the first two books and were evidenced in others have been overcome. The spiritual quest has been successful, and there is a sense of calm and repose in the protagonist.

It may be noted here that Thurman's often individualistic struggles have blended into what Eliade terms a "cosmic symbolism,"<sup>44</sup> where he takes in the whole of life in his philosophy and sees it as being capable of being sanctified: "The means by which its sanctification is brought about are various, but the result is always the same: life is lived on a two-fold plane; it takes its course as human existence and, at the same time, shares in a transhuman life, that of the cosmos or the gods."<sup>45</sup> Thurman has harmonized into his Christian faith many elements he encountered in his studies of and absorption in mystical religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jewish mysticism of the Hasidic movement.<sup>46</sup> Eliade describes this as the perspective of religious man of the archaic societies," who felt:

that the world exists because it was created by the gods, and that the existence of the world itself 'means' something, 'want to say' something, that the world is neither mute or opaque, that it is not an inert thing without purpose or significance. For religious man, the cosmos 'lives' and 'speaks.' The mere life of the cosmos is proof of its sanctity, since the cosmos was created by the gods and the gods show themselves to men through cosmic life.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, Eliade continues:

This is why at a certain stage of culture, man conceives of himself as a microcosm. He forms part of the gods; creation; in other words, he finds in himself the same sanctity that he recognizes in the cosmos. It follows that his life is homologized to cosmic life; as a divine work, the cosmos becomes the paradigmatic image of human existence.<sup>48</sup>

In some sense, this was the discovery of Thurman in his search which he was able to blend into his Christian experience and knowledge. He is

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<sup>44</sup> Mercea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1957). "Cosmic symbolism adds a new value to an object or action, without affecting their peculiar and immediate values. An existence open to the world is not an unconscious existence 'buried in nature' [as Hegel said of primitive man]. Openness to the world enables religious man to know himself in knowing the world—and this knowledge is precious to him because it pertains to being" (p. 167) This was Thurman's discovery and achievement in his search.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Willingford, Pa.: Pendel Hill, 1961). Here Thurman defines his mystic outlook and grounding and reveals his own study of the subject.

<sup>47</sup> *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 165.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*



fond of using the phrase: "Life is alive.<sup>49</sup> One keen representation of the mystical connection of all of life and its link with the divine is in the poem from Meditations of the Heart titled, "The Threads in My Hand," (pp. 126-127). The poem opens with the words: "Only one end of the threads, I hold in my hand. The threads go many ways linking my life with other lives." It concludes with the lines: "One thread is a strange thread—it is my steadying thread. God's hand holds the other end . . ." (p. 127).

### VIII. *The Literary Theologian*

In the whole search, it may be that Thurman, with his literary imagination, gives greater meaning to his religious understanding by doing in a modern scientific world exactly the opposite of what Rudolf Bultman suggests.<sup>50</sup> He mythologizes, rather than demythologizes, the process of Christian growth to spiritual fulfillment. He actualizes the creative encounter referred to by Heidegger, "an occurring, a happening of the truth at work."<sup>51</sup> Thurman demonstrates that man grasps and appropriates the regeneration concept in a process of working from the internal perception to the external (encounter) realization. His "literary approach to truth," as Roland Frye states concerning other Christian humanist, contributes "to the integrity depth and vigor of Christian thought—or, as Martin Luther put it, to 'pure theology.'"<sup>52</sup> Thurman is most often the theological poet described by Nathan Scott:

The poet—that is, the artist in language, whatever may be his particular genre—does not characteristically, bring the abstractive passion of science, and its universalizing perspectives, to his dealings with the world; he consents to all what is regular and nonconformist and unique to have a very sharp impact upon him, and he does not spirit it away into any 'system of all-inclusive relations.' He wants to apprehend that irreducible particularity of a thing whereby it is what it is instead of being a thousand other possible things.<sup>53</sup>

Scott's description of the experience and the posture of the poet as reaching the height of divine apprehension and reverence is also quite applicable to Thurman:

It is, I believe, in some such way as this that poetic experience is suffused, in its intensest modes, with an awareness of the world, in its concrete phenomenality, as a

<sup>49</sup> Disciplines of the Spirit, p. 14; Meditations of the Heart, pp. 99-142.

<sup>50</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

<sup>51</sup> Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, and Thought (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 36 & 53.

<sup>52</sup> R. Frye, p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Poetry and Prayer," in Giles Gunn, ed., Literature and Religion (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 198.



sacrament of the divine immanence. And, of course, to be in the situation of beholding the world in its dimension of depth and to know ourselves searched and 'spoken' to by that depth is very nearly to be in the situation of prayer; for prayer is nothing but the most cruelly delusive auto-suggestion, if it be not a heedless exposure to what is ultimately Deep in the common, ordinary, concrete realities of our experience.<sup>54</sup>

What we have reflected, finally in the seven books examined is the "story" of Thurman's "coming to belief."<sup>55</sup> The books do not give that story in chronological detail but reflect its details in an imaginative fashion. The substance of Thurman's "story" is captured in his short literary pieces and in his longer works. In fact, the works have all the characteristics of autobiography discussed by Sallie TeSelle: concern with self, a dominant vision of that self, harmony between outward events and inward growth and a kind of "knowing" she calls aesthetic.<sup>56</sup> And his autobiographical material is the very type of autobiography she describes as parabolic theology, as seen in both Paul and Augustine:

In this perspective, theology becomes a story, a very personal story, as personal as lyric poetry—and as revealing. It is on a continuum with the parable—a dominant decision that binds the inner and outer world, a master form that allows us to say of the Prodigal Son or of Augustine, "Yes, here is the man."<sup>57</sup>

The words of TeSelle seem precisely to be describing Thurman as she says of the theologian—autobiography: "It is existential theology with a vengeance; it is the living of belief, not the talking about it or the systematizing of it." It is the kind of theology that parabolically says, "see what I am' and then enter into your own soul and discover your prime direction, your master form, your center and focus."<sup>58</sup> One of Thurman's own poems sums up his goal and character as such a theologian:

And therefore, for love's sake, then,  
I will do what no power  
in heaven or hell or on earth  
could make me do if I did not love.  
So, God, as experience must be like this,  
I would not snare thee in a web of words,  
I would not try to reduce  
all the vast reaches of Thy meaning  
to paltry symbols.  
I would but open myself to Thee  
and let Thy spirit invade me  
and fill me until I do not know  
what is mine or Thine.  
This would be my fulfillment,

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>55</sup> TeSelle, pp. 119ff.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151ff.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



O my God!

(*The Centering Moment*, p. 125)<sup>60</sup>

Many of Thurman's writings belong to the classification TeSelle labels "confessional statements" which are off a mixed genre.<sup>60</sup> And his prose-poems, prayers, and autobiographical, epigrammatic essays are illustrative of the metaphoric or parabolic language TeSelle attributes to Paul's letters, John Woollman's *Journal*, and Teilhard de Chardin's mystical compositions.<sup>61</sup> One example is the prose-poem, "How good It Is To Center Down," which begins thus:

How good it is to center down!  
 To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!  
 The streets of minds seethe with endless traffic;  
 Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,  
 While something deep within hungers and thirsts  
     for the still moment and the resting lull.  
 With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes,  
     a fresh sense of order in our living;  
 A direction, a strong sure purpose that will  
     structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos  
 We look at ourselves in this waiting moment—  
     the kinds of people we are.

The poem ends with:

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment  
 As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of  
     Our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—  
 A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart  
     makes clear.  
 It moves directly to the core of our being, our questions  
     are answered,  
 Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into  
     the traffic of our daily round  
 With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

<sup>60</sup> New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

<sup>60</sup> TeSelle, p. 158. Among the writers whose works fit this category, she discusses Paul, Augustine, John Woolman, Sam Keene, and Teilhard de Chardin. Interestingly, she notes that these authors have found clever ways of avoiding too much concern with self, ways of understanding the self vocationally: by use of the letter, the prayer, the journal. To this might be added the meditation, the reflective poem, or the epigrammatic essay, such as we find in Thurman.

<sup>61</sup> TeSelle, pp. 158ff. TeSelle quotes Robert Funk concerning the relation of the parable to Paul's language and to all subsequent Christian language:

If the parable is that mode of language which founds a world, and that particular world is under the domain of God's grace, all other language in the Christian tradition is derivative in relation to it. It is out of this 'poetic' medium that the tradition springs, however far in fact it may subsequently wander from it. Paul's language, as well as other languages in the New Testament and early church, presupposes such a foundational language tradition.



How good it is to center down!

(Meditations of the Heart, pp. 28-29)

Typical of Thurman's short, pithy essays, which I call epigrammatic, are "Meaning is Inherent in Life" (pp. 14-15 in The Inward Journey) and "To Die Unshriven" (pp. 141-142 in Meditations of the Heart). These have a definite metaphoric quality, as mentioned by TeSelle. The first one begins:

Inherent in life is meaning. This is a quality, independent of the way in which outside forces may operate upon life. The life in the seed burst forth in root and stalk and fruit—the whole process takes place within. Many forces operate upon it from without—cramping the roots, making the shape of the stalk into a caricature of itself—but always with whatever life there is, the guilt-in purpose is never given up. Concerning this meaning there is doubt, wherever life appears. This is the integrity of life, it is the commitment of life; this is the singular characteristic of all aliveness; this is the miracle, the shaping of matter from within; the materializing of vitality. The total experience seems to take place in a manner so pervasive that we look in vain for the center, the location of the secret.

(The Inward Journey, p. 14)

The concluding lines of the essay move on to center that life in God. And the substance of the essay is not only parabolic, but also paradigmatic: one life is a paradigm for others.

The second essay builds on details embodied in two paragraphs to a dramatic climax in the last sentence. Quoting the various responses of several persons to the prospect of death, the author states: "The fear of death is often one of the final conquests of the courageous spirit." He then examines one reason for the fear: "the fact that there is something which seems too final and absolute about the separation that death implies." A number of epigrams from this essay demonstrate its forcefulness. In an attempt to deal with that fear he states:

In the first place, it is a universal experience in which all things share. It confirms the oneness and solidarity of life. Again, it is a vital part of the life process. In a sense, all living is a struggle between the will to live and the will to die. Again, there are some things in life that are worse than death. It is urgent to remember that death is not the worst thing in the world. Again, death is an event in life. It is something that occurs in life rather than something that occurs to life.

(Meditations of the Heart, pp. 141-142)

The essay concludes:

Finally, the glorious thing about man's encounter with death is the fact that what a man discovers about the meaning of life as he lives it, need not undergo any change as he meets death. It is a final tribute to the character of an individual's living if he can die "unshriven" but full-blown as he has lived. Such a man goes down to his grave with a shout. (p. 142)

In the final analysis, one may say of Thurman what TeSelle says of Paul: "He not only uses himself, but he thinks in and through himself: he



takes himself as a human metaphor. He thinks as has often been said of the metaphorical poets, with the blood; he is there in the midst of his own thought."<sup>62</sup> or more precisely what she says of Augustine:

Becoming a Christian meant for him undertaking the discipline of making the language he used his way of life. For Augustine, then, the incarnation means something quite definite for the Christian: it means that understanding certain things, things which bear upon his or her own existence, cannot be understood unless he or she is prepared to embody them. The task of becoming a Christian, and particularly of becoming a theologian, one who speaks about God, one who dares to break the silence, is therefore a long process, a dialectic of insight from God and a concomitant struggle on his or her side to incarnate that insight into his or her own life.<sup>63</sup>

This statement seems to me to epitomize Thurman's literary/humanist bent as a theologian.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164. One should take serious note here, however, of Mallard's criticism of TeSelle. While he shows appreciation for her refreshing point of view regarding the metaphoric origins of theology, he warns that, "Metaphoric insight taken by itself can replace an objective, heteronomous 'burden of the law' only with an equivalent, subjective burden." Thus, he adopts the position that "both phases of literary reading, the metaphoric and the objective, in a certain rhythm are essential for comprehending the imaginative foundations of Christian theology," "William Mallard, *The Reflection of Theology in Literature* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1977), pp. 14-15. It should be noted also that Thurman does incorporate both these aspects in his theology "in a certain rhythm," the objective aspect being found in the discursive books and the metaphoric, in the books of meditations, sermons, and poetry.



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