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Worship and Anti-Structure in Thurman's Vision of the Sacred

In the probing and analysis of states of the soul . . . , [even] of solemn worship, it will be well if regard be paid to what is unique in them rather than what they have in common with other similar states.

Rudolf Otto

There is a spirit in us that contains our spirit . . . , that makes the case for the good impulse when the rational judgment sends the mind spinning the opposite way, that broods over all weariness until the change comes and the heart is revived.

Howard Thurman

The vain task of trying to find out in what precise way certain symbols found in the ritual, poetry, or iconography of a given society "reflect" or "express" its social or political structure can . . . be abandoned. Symbols may well reflect not the structure but anti-structure, and not only "reflect" but can contribute to *creating* it.

Victor Turner

As an ecstatic modality of ritual, worship, in a real sense, is an endeavor to free one's thoughts, to enliven one's conscience, and to revitalize one's heart. To be sure, worship takes place in a cultural field; that is, worship transpires in the realms of solitary reflection and complex social dealings. Worship, then, is grounded in and is conditioned by a single vision of "the winged moment as it flies" (William Blake).

In other words, the experience of adoration and sacred awe is impacted by means of an unique and singular something (Rudolf Otto), by means of the spirit which both contains and revives our spirit (Howard Thurman), and by means of the ritual symbols which reflect and create anti-structures in an otherwise structured world (Victor Turner). Moreover, worship has to do with acts of sheer worthiness, reverence, and respect as these acts are associated with ritually endowed religious practices.

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In this regard, worship should be construed always as embodying something more than the one-dimensional posture of admiration, honor, devotion, or idolization tendered a divine being. More than the customary forms of devotional practice, worship involves gestures of joy and reverence which reflect an inner change that leads to self-fulfillment or self-realization.

Worship is a special exploration into awareness. As such, it encompasses forms of communication—verbal and non-verbal, rational and non-rational—which occur between God and human beings. Hence, body contact, dance, music, poetry, prayer, silence, and story comprise some of the key components of worship; and several of these components lend structure to the aesthetics underlying the dynamics of black worship. Many black persons have held a connoisseurship in worship and, thus, have assumed a leadership role in spirituality.

Howard Thurman, as religious visionary, exemplary preacher, and moral activist, orchestrated his life both at the center and on the boundary of worshipful acts and ritual processes. He venerated the creative strivings of the solitary individual, and, throughout his life, he was devoted to building constructive programs in order to achieve viable forms of community. In his vision of the sacred, an admiration of God was predicated upon the unity undergirding life and reality—a unity which encompassed and transcended social structures and anti-structures. Hence, Thurman's vision of the sacred should be regarded as an interesting point of departure for seriously considering the theory, pragmatics, and compelling nature of worship. But, initially, I think it appropriate to say something about worship and the structures generated by means of the experience of worship.

Worship and Structure

Elsewhere, when discussing religion and worship, I said the following.¹

Ritual is a potent form of action. It is religion in action, and, as such, ritual is the means by which religion achieves what it sets out to do. . . . Within black religion, as expressed in its African and Afro-American forms, [worship as] ritual is almost always associated with moral conflict and social problems Through black religion, worship, ritual, drama and the power of the divinity are correlated.

The above assertions, as expressed in my essay titled "Ritual, Drama and God in Black Religion," convey the idea that worship as ritual is a field of interlocking forces. These peculiar forces are expressed by the concomitant work of several vitalizing agents, i.e., the ritual devotees as worshippers, the black preacher as a vehicle of *charisma* and/or the spir-

¹ Robert C. Williams, "Ritual, Drama and God in Black Religion," *Theology Today* XLI (January 1985): 433, 434.

itual *elan vital*, the peak experience as sedimented in the frenzy (e.g., the shout, music and rhythmic talk), and the symbols as couched in dramatic form (e.g., a vivacious outward testimony as a sign of the fire which moves on the main altar of the heart, or the holy dance, or intimations of the resolvment of the conflicts of the external environment). My reasoning in the essay on ritual and drama led to the conclusion that black American

human beings, as ritual agents, quest for resolution and relief, participate in a field of meaning, by means of right action, exteriority, and the embodiment of a special mystery. In this connection, symbolic or ritual actions, more than, say, a textual expression or a verbal orientation, define and gesticulate the vital dimension of reality. Ritual actions really embody and account for the problematic which is lived, practiced, and experienced.²

Accordingly, to render a report on the structure, essence, and efficacy of worship is to rely primarily upon the representational work of the imagination. In discussing worship as a fundament of human experience, the role of reason is subordinated to the work of the imagination. Reason's categories—reason's mental structures and ordering power—will not capture the essence of worship as easily or as fully as will the play of the imagination. Worship is awareness, is awe and devotion, in a state of flux. So, through the function of the imagination, "the winged moment" of worship can be documented and aptly described.

Perhaps Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* begins with a straightforward discussion of the "rational" and the "non-rational" simply because rational attributes are "*synthetic* essential attributes"—that is, these cognitive attributes clearly are predictions of a subject which they qualify, but as they function in relation to a unique subject matter (e.g., religious attributes of the sacred and the holy) these rational attributes cannot comprehend adequately religion's object or its ritual structure. Thus, Otto counselled his readers to ponder whether the sacred or the holy—as the essential or primary dimension of religion—can be exclusively contained and exhaustively explicated in any series of "rational assertions."³ Religion—and certainly the undertaking of the adoration of the sacred as in worship—concludes Otto, is a domain of human experience which presents itself as a crucial something that is unmistakably specific and unique, a *sui generis*, a compelling power, an aspect of reality "peculiar to itself." Not surprisingly, then, religion and its core activity or worship "completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts."⁴ If religion as a manifestation of the holy cannot be effectively apprehended by rational categories, or, strictly speaking, if religion cannot be taught

² Ibid., p. 433.

³ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 4.

⁴ Ibid., p. 5. See pp. 60-72 regarding expressions of the *numinous*.

by use of reason alone, then maybe it can only be "evoked, awakened in the mind" even as that which is of the spirit can and must be awakened by the force of the spirit.⁵

In sum, worship is based upon and is fired by the moments of a deeply felt religious experience, an experience that cannot be profitably qualified by other forms of awareness or by the epistemic strictures of human consciousness (the moral, the aesthetic, or the conceptual). Otto observes that whoever cannot direct his mind to recall "a moment of deeply-felt religious experience" or remember "any intrinsically religious feelings" will be incapable of forming a theory about, or of rendering a report on, worship and the holy which a religious person will accept.⁶

Valid and believable accounts of worship have to take into consideration the situation of the worshipper—that is, *where* the worshipper worships, *who* the worshipper is, and the nature of order generated by means of the experience of worship. Each of the conditions i.e., the where, who, and sense of order in worship—has to do with structure. Worship is a structure which can, and often does, become an anti-structure. Religious symbols and ritual practice often do reflect not just the structure but an anti-structure in a given society. The anthropologist Victor Turner voiced this sentiment, thus preparing a way of understanding worship which can disclose something of the inner nature of the worship experience itself.

In Turner's view, society is not an abstract system; rather, it is a process by which persons and groups alternate between fixed and "floating worlds," imposing upon themselves limits while generating novelty and new models of behavior.

By verbal and non-verbal means of classification we impose upon ourselves innumerable constraints and boundaries to keep chaos at bay. . . . Yet in order to live, to breathe, and to generate novelty, human beings have had to create—by structural means—spaces and times in the calendar. . . . These liminal areas of time and space—rituals, carnivals, dramas, and latterly films—are open to the play of thought, feeling, and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jural models that control the centers of a society's ongoing life.⁷

⁵ Ibid., p. 7. See also pp. 143ff; and Appendix VIII on worship.

⁶ Ibid., p. 8. Also, the reader should ponder the fact that rationality alone is not an adequate means of exploring one's full humanity; one's emotions, one's feelings, are a significant part of experience. Rationality suggests order, engenders a gestalt or a pattern, whereas emotion can imply an openness to the richness, complexity, and diversity of experience. One's emotions can and often do relate to those instances where there is a displacement of the socially defined sense of self. With such a displacement, reason ceases to dominate and the non-verbal emerges at the center of awareness. What is imagined via the non-rational has more communicative power than that which can be conceptualized. In addition, consult Alasdair MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power and Philosophy," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 59 (September 1985): 5-22.

⁷ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, New

Thus, by means of an analysis of ritual as worship, culture should not be regarded only as a structure. Culture is more complex, and does not exist only in the form of a passive mirror reflecting primarily images of productive modes and relations which enforce the dominance of the productively privileged.⁸ Worship, as an anti-structural liminality, as a life on the margin, denotes how society can be at once subject and direct object, how an anti-structural liminality represents the reflexivity of the social process.⁹ Anti-structure, as generated by means of the ritual process, is liminal or marginal, is part of the serious life (Durkheim's "*de la vie serieuse*"); and, thus, liminality as a ritual anti-structure tends to cut across or to occur outside of structural relationships.¹⁰ By an analysis of ritual, Turner posits a difference between society as "structure" and society as "anti-structure."¹¹ Thus, structure and anti-structure are modes of interrelatedness. Society can be unstructured or structured, and through ritual and worship one can catch a glimpse of society as a process that engenders structured and unstructured modes of participation. Worship as ritual evidences the power to encode itself in symbol systems which produce structures and anti-structures. Thus, Turner maintains that

liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature, and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as thought. Each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psychobiological levels simultaneously.¹²

Turner discussed the liminal and the marginal phases of ritual among the Ndembu people of Zambia and the Hindu system of caste relations as instances of structure, anti-structure, counter-structure, and restructuring. These structural forms can coexist over time in a ritual field.¹³ In an intriguing exposition of Turner's views on contemporary Christian worship, J. Randall Nichols poses three particularly promising areas for discussion:

- (1) understanding the relationship of the worship experience to the workaday world;
- (2) evaluating the appropriateness of "contemporization" in modern worship; and (3)

York: Cornell University Press; 1969) p. vii.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. vii. Also, see Turner's *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 272-275.

¹⁰ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, p. 274.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 272.

¹² Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 129.

¹³ Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, pp. 274-279; Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 99-106.

examining our perennial conflict between the middle-class civility of worship and the biblical address to the poor, the maimed, and the oppressed.¹⁴

As we will see below, worship relates to social structures, transcends social structures, and can generate anti-structures within social processes. Some aspects of worship have the power to uproot and to replace some of "the force-backed political and jural models that control the centers of a society's ongoing life."¹⁵ Also, worship has the power to "incite men to action as well as thought."¹⁶ Looking at contemporary worship from the anthropological perspective provided by Victor Turner yields some helpful insights, especially as regards the middle-class consciousness, the biblical witness, and the plight of marginalized persons.

In sum, the experience of intensity or ecstasy in worship or ritual is a time when one is neither here nor there socially. That is, peak experiences generated within worship are liminal experiences, are experiences on the margin whereby one's "lowliness" or "sacredness" stands in contrast to one's regular place in the social scheme of things. For example, one's social experience as a poor and oppressed person can be qualified by means of the liminal state of worship. In a sense, the liminal experience (induced by the ecstasy of worship) indicates the contingent nature of the social world—suggesting that where there is a desired loss of social status and previous caste there is a gain of a new social awareness and spiritual power. For example, some symbols and techniques used in worship, especially black worship, have an anti-structural dimension, a change-invoking power. Thus certain features of worship can foster an anti-structural experience with regard to the socially structured world; and often these special features suggest that worship can be more than a time of retreat and "passive contemplation." Such is the case since worship often does relate "dialectically and perhaps paradoxically to the world of structure" while being distinct from it.¹⁷

Thurman's Vision of the Sacred

Howard Thurman was a creative and a serious thinker; but, as a thinker, he was interested in that which takes human persons beyond cognition and beyond the ordinary categories of thought. Thus, his suggestion was that one be self-conscious about experience and reflect upon what one experiences—that one be willing to ponder all dimensions of experience, especially the spiritual aspect of experience as it is captured

¹⁴ J. Randall Nichols, "Worship as Anti-Structure: The Contribution of Victor Turner," *Theology Today* XLI, (January 1985): 401-402.

¹⁵ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. vii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁷ Nichols, "Worship as Anti-Structure," p. 405.

in worship. In other words, Thurman believed that one's relation to one's experiences is a gateway to the spiritual world. To be sure, this religious or spiritual gateway pertains to who one is as a single and separate person. There is something private and personal about being oneself. At its core, this privacy is spiritual in nature—is like being a private island on a boundless sea. But there is a paradox in this concern for the spiritual identity of self, since “To experience one's self is to enter into a solitary world that is one's unique possession and that can never be completely and utterly shared.”¹⁸ Yet, the human spirit, as Thurman taught, cannot abide the enforced loneliness of isolation: “for mutual interdependence is characteristic of all of life.”¹⁹ And the search for the ground of both the independence of the self and the interdependence of all of life is a search best undertaken through the agency of worship. In fact, Thurman's view of worship is qualified by his vision of the sacred—that is, the sacred as the unity which undergirds the diversity in human beginnings, structures, dreams, forms of consciousness, and instances of identity. Accordingly, the search for the common and the unifying is sacred; and this sacred search is what constitutes both the parameters and essence of worship.

As a thinker Thurman spawned a religious philosophy which treats four interlocking themes: spirit, unity, centeredness, and truth. Spirit is eternal and pervades all levels of existence; it permeates natural and human activity and thus ultimately supplies unity and wholeness to all life forms and modes of being. Persons can transcend the constraints of finite existence by means of revelation as well as by special forms of intuition and/or centering. Moreover, persons or selves can discern through worship, and with the aid of spiritual exercises, the truth about themselves and others, the truth about God and reality. Divine Presence or spirit makes an important difference for human existence. Everyone can discover the truth of reality—“the scent of the eternal in all living things.” In other words, the human soul in the sacred search for unity *sees* and *comprehends* and *creates* in response to the spiritual presence: sees by the agency of introspection, comprehends by means of the power of God, and creates by choosing to entwine itself in the passion and chaos of its own spontaneity. Oddly, religion as ritual merely seems to be equated to a way of seeing things and/or seems to be reduced to a primary form of awareness. But religion for Thurman had to be something more than the sheer experience of having a perspective or simply of perceiving matters in a particularly sensitive manner. A soul's experience of worship, of creative encounter with the eternal, forms the bedrock of its vision of existence.

¹⁸ Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 2

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Visions of existence, even sacred visions, begin with the reality and point of reference of the body. For Thurman, the most concrete manner in which to think of the self is in terms of the body. He specifically says: ". . . my body participates completely in the life process" and hence "there can be no sense of self on the part of the individual where there is no self-conscious experience of the body as one's own unique, private, and peculiar possession."²⁰ The sense of self as in itself, as an "I," is grounded in the reality of embodiment as the opposite of beinglessness.

The body is a man's intimate dwelling place; it is his domain as nothing else can ever be. It is coexistent with himself. If for any reason whatsoever a man is alienated in his own body whither by shame, outrage, or brutality, his sense of community within himself is rendered difficult, if not impossible.²¹

Awareness of the self in relation to itself as a solitary existence is established first in the experience and actuality of the body. Within the bounds established by existence in the body, the person fashions a world and weaves a fabric of self-realization—weaves for itself a fabric of identity within itself as conscious being.

Even as the self strives to actualize itself in itself, in its spatial-temporal embodiment and in its egocentric venturing, it seeks to overcome the limitations of its temporality by an ascent to timelessness via transcendence. This type of psychic activity or process of transcending Thurman termed centering. He believed that one's self is one's "center," is the staging nexus of one's activities, inner events, and spiritual journeying. In short, the individual or self is never totally an independent, isolated unit. The self is part of that vitality, that holy presence, which binds all living things.

In his book, *The Creative Encounter*, Thurman examines the nature of spirituality as it involves the individual totally, the person or self inclusive of emotions and feelings and thoughts. His concern in his book of meditations is with both the inwardness and the outwardness of religion—is specifically about "the effect of the sense of Presence upon the total life of the individual." For Thurman, Spiritual Presence in the life of the individual is at the core of worship and religious experience. And this creative spiritual experience, as adumbrated in the form of religious quest and reflective thought, is defined "as a dynamic encounter between man and God through the experience of prayer and human suffering." This confrontation or encounter is with God as the sustainer of existence itself. Within the bounds of this confrontation, the human, in the form of the human spirit, "is exposed to the kind of experience that is capable of

²⁰ Ibid., p. 78.

²¹ Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 40.

providing an ultimate clue to all levels of reality." As such, the self in its singular encounter with the Supreme Other has the confidence of ultimate security, lasting worth, and an abiding sense of purpose—a confidence which is nurtured in worship as the sacred search for unity and harmonious living.

Religion is the self's encounter with something more, and, hence it indeed is more than the self's awareness of itself or other selves. Whereas Thurman expressed this belief in many ways and in varied forms, I think that he continuously struggled to be emphatically clear about what he conceived spiritual experience to be. Hence, in that important interview with Mr. Eyre late in his life, Thurman cautiously concluded: "So for me religious experience is not a philosophy, it is not a technique, it is not a skill; it is a sense of being, it is the flavor of my spirit that is uniquely mine, indigenous to me."²² My belief is that Thurman always felt that religious experience, like divinity itself, is not to be limited by our concepts or ways of thinking—is not to be stabilized in creeds, dogmas, or theologies. And, too, Thurman did not regard worship as a fixed pattern of practice; nor did he view it as a static form of awareness. He saw it as a sense of feeling at home in the world, of being capable in one swirling moment of internalizing the intensity of religion's emotional response to the mystery of eternal presence. Worship and religious participation are ventures; thus, they cut across the habit of thought to which we are most accustomed—and, accordingly,

We must not hamper the creative form that the spirit of God may inspire, by clinging to the patterns with which we are ordinarily familiar. Of course, we shall make many errors, but we shall not be mistaken in the soundness of the thing we are undertaking.²³

To be sure, religion must have an altar—have a place where an aspect of oneself is offered up in the sacred search for unity—but, in order for the experience of the spiritual presence to remain vital, that altar must be torn down, sometimes even repeatedly, and a new one built. Near the end of his earthly life, Thurman stated that it is not the nature of religious experience to be stabilized. "As long as the experience of [worship in religion] is vital, the only way it can spread is by contagion—not by instruction, not by addressing the mind, but something one person can catch from another, as you can catch the measles."²⁴

²² Cf. *Theology Today* XXXVIII (July 1981): 213, for an interview with Dr. Thurman wherein he freely discussed his views on religion, ritual and spirituality.

²³ Howard Thurman, *The First Footprints: The Dawn of the Idea of The Church for The Fellowship of All Peoples* (San Francisco: The Church for The Fellowship of All Peoples, 1975), p. 46.

²⁴ *Theology Today* XXXVIII (July 1981): 211.

Worship and Social Change

The miracle of worship is grounded in and speaks to life itself: life as it unfolds in unity and reverence. Through worship, the human spirit is stripped and laid bare. By this process of stripping the self, of reflection and search, the boundaries of the self are dimmed, and, as if outside of social time, these boundaries are reaffirmed in association with the moral demands made by the reverence for life. When worship succeeds, i.e., engages the worshippers as seekers and valuers, in expanding the scope of consciousness of persons, these persons approach the complex dealings of social life with a renewed spirit and a different perspective. Thus, if a worshipper internalizes the *elan vital* of the eternal spirit and develops a new sense of self, then the place of the self in the social world may be viewed in radically different terms. In this regard, worship as an aesthetic—even an epistemological, communicative, moral and psychological—structure becomes an anti-structure. As an anti-structure, worship has the potential to tear down, to enrich, and to alter the structures of a social world. The myths, symbols, and ritual forms of worship not only enhance thought; they can, and often do, go beyond thought and “incite men to action.” In this respect, worship relates dialectically to social reality and change, being at once an essential part of the social process while at the same time its use of icons, music, drama, and language delineates a domain (ritual time) distinct from the social process.

The “distinctness” or “otherness” which is a central part of worship is communal in nature. Turner termed this mode of interrelatedness (by means of anti-structure) *communitas*. This ritual mode of being arises out of situations of marginality.

Communitas is a fact of everyone's experience, yet it has also never been regarded as a reputable or coherent object of study by social scientists. It is, however, central to religion, literature, drama, and art, and its trances may be found deeply engraven in law, ethics, kinship, and even economics. . . . [People who experience *communitas* are the instruments by which] a society takes cognizance of itself, or rather where, in an interval between their incumbency of specific fixed positions, members of that society may obtain an approximation, however limited, to a global view of man's place in the cosmos and his relations with other classes of visible entities.²⁶

Such a “global view” is what prompted Thurman to regard worship, and its attendant forms of meditation, as the means by which the vision of unity and harmony is attained. One seminal deposit of the fruits of worship, Thurman believed, was the black spiritual songs—a rhythmic worshipping voice which conveyed an abiding enthusiasm for life, the voice of slaves that produced “a view of life which included all their exper-

²⁶ Nichols, “Worship as Anti-Structure,” p. 402. Cf. Victor W. Turner, “Passage, Margins, and Poverty,” *Worship* XLVI (Private Circulation): 393, 400.

iences without exhausting themselves in those experiences"²⁶ Created by black and unknown bards, these plaintive songs—sometimes a repetition of sorrowful cries, and more often the expression of hope in the heat of religious fervor—were addressed to the downtrodden. To the oppressed and downtrodden, these songs convey a firm faith in God as the saviour of the Hebrew children and the deliverer of the slaves. If the religious songs of the black slaves could make one feel at home, within the world and with oneself, then the songs had fulfilled their religious and theological purpose. People with their backs against the wall, as well as those who are within the ranks of the underprivileged poor, will readily employ in their worship the political language of liberation. Such persons will regard themselves as outsiders with respect to the community of power; and thus they will not view social action (and social change) as an end in itself. "Social action," Thurman once said, "is an expression of resistance against whatever tends to or separates one from the experience of God, who is the very ground of being."²⁷ Inspiration derived from worship primarily is not social action oriented, not social change oriented; nor is it merely thrust upon one so that one may improve society or so that one may work to relieve suffering and human misery. The real point to consider when reflecting upon the purpose and utility of worship is to identify and remove all that prevents God from coming to presence in the life of an individual—the real point is to see to it that God is not prevented from standing at the altar with human beings and from being present in all sectors of creation.

Change is an important feature of reality, and change is a very special factor in the social process. Needless to say, change is a feature of experience which impacts upon worship and upon which worship impacts. But beyond the change that we experience in the social world is the more enduring experience of sensing that we are being upheld and cradled by strength that is not of our making, something, as Howard Thurman would say, that gives to life a quality of integrity and meaning which we could never generate. Often, it is through the experience of worship that we discover the benedictions of life which flow in upon us and make our lives a sacrament in the hand of God. And, also, it is through worship that we discover that God is not finished with us or the work of creation. Caught up in the excitement of worship, we begin to stir, we sense that our souls are being fed, and we see life in a new perspective and in a new way. Hence, as anti-structure, worship induces social change by liberating the believer.

²⁶ Cf. Howard Thurman, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends Unlimited, 1975).

²⁷ Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Action," *The Lawrence Lectures on Religion and Society* (San Francisco, California: private printing), p. 21.

Some Comments On Black Worship

Worship in the black context, vis-à-vis a black idiom, tends to be therapeutic as well as an end in itself. Moreover, worship in the black idiom functions to heal individuals, to celebrate and support black identity, to offer blacks a sense of place and significance in the continuity and flow of a troublesome life. Preachin' and prayin' and testifying' and singin' have kept black folks together and enabled them to survive. In the worship of the black Christian tradition, a host of things has happened, but often "the music and message [of worship] were so good that none dared break the spell with practical considerations and strategy for this world's liberation. The people felt too healed and whole."²⁸ Yet, paradoxically, there has been a marriage of ecstasy and involvement in the worship of black folks, a marriage which preserves the spiritual transport of black worship. Thus, what Henry Mitchell issued as a warning some fifteen years ago is relevant today: "To attempt to separate educational enablement and practical involvement in Black liberation from worship would be . . . to sentence them to death."²⁹

The above words, which constitute a mere explaining of the ritual aspect of black religion, are attempts to explain and describe a special experience—and, to be sure, the explanation is the least relevant thing about spirituality and worship. What is relevant about worship in the black community is that, when it is implemented, it is imaginative, free floating and flexible, rhythmic and soulful, innovative and serendipitous. What is precisely significant about worship in the black tradition is that it happens with dramatic force.

Africa and the environment of the new world have been determinative for the evolvement of black worship. Religion, ritual, and spirituality are pervasive in Africa, for at every point of human concern life forces are correlated with God, spirits, and ancestors. Accordingly, religious practices are grounded in life. Ritual practice and worship are given shape by the imaginative work of art, dance, story-telling, music, and various forms of nonverbal communication. With the traditional African, worship entails a search for order and the resolution of social (and cosmic) conflict viv-à-vis the changing and complex dealings of group life. So wherever the African goes, there religion will be manifested, for in the daily life of the African a special form of sacred power will influence everything. Such socially significant aspects of life as birth, celebrations, fertility control, healing, ordeals and oath-taking, funerals, sacrifice, and new year festivals are occasions for worship and ritual practice.

Much of what transpires in the worship of the black tradition can be

²⁸ Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1970), pp. 214f.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

associated with Africa. Even in those instances where blacks are passionately Christian or Moslem, features of the African sensibility and the African style of communication are evident. In almost every case of worship, black Americans predicate their religion and worship upon a definite experience of God. Thus, God is the indisputable focus of faith and practice. Among the slaves who were brought to the new world from Africa, the inner world of religion and worship fostered a new orientation to life; a "new individuation" and an "inward reintegration." Spirituality and worship were central to slave life, so much so that

the religion of the slave community was institutionalized in a ritual process that was dramatic in character, that was influenced by the shout, and that was the means by which conversion and God were experienced. Slaves worshipped God and used the force of worship to relate to their suffering. They thus were enabled to follow a more or less orderly means of ritually seeking solutions to their problems.³⁰

Today, much of the worship in the black Christian tradition draws heavily upon the forms of ritual and modes of worship established by the slave community. Black people today are a proud, strident folk, come of age and eager to follow the empowerment of liberation. It, therefore, is no surprise to discover that worship, theology, and liberation are interrelated. Several agenda items in liturgics and theology comprise future work in this area.

Theology, Worship, and Community

At the outset it was stated that worship is a venture in the form of a search, an endeavor to liberate one's thought and enliven one's heart. In the black tradition, for the most part worship is free, flexible, and fascinating. Howard Thurman, as a black preacher and a consummate liturgist, was free, creative, and provocative. He regarded worship as a search for the sacred unity that binds all things, and as the unity that comprises the common ground of human striving. For Thurman, there is a spirit in us that contains our spirit, a spirit which brings change to us by generating a new vision and power in our lives. Alienation, separation, finitude, and pride are dealt with in the experience of worship; these are dealt with through the agency of the individual self first and, secondly, within community. The necessity to feel oneself as a primary part of all of life was a feeling that Thurman could never overcome. His, *The Search for Common Ground*, is a study of the racial memory and a reflection of what is implicit in all living structures, a study orchestrated into an analysis of community based upon a God-Presence, a presence that is actualized in the apotheosis of divinity in human beings.

What emerges from a consideration of Thurman's reflection on wor-

³⁰ Williams, "Ritual, Drama and God in Black Religion," p. 438.

ship is the challenge to think of the sacred, of spirituality, in the plural, with respect to the finite and culturally mediated character of its many expressions. Worship in the black tradition is an instance, multivalent in character, of the cultural particularities of a people who boldly and happily search for that in the sacred which is liberating and supportive. It is a case of searching for a dimension of experience that will afford life in structure and change and anti-structure.

Worship is the human response to hunger, and Howard Thurman graphically and skillfully reminded us of the depth of that persistent hunger.³¹ The corpus of his writings³² deals with the satisfaction of the hunger of the human heart through the agency of worship and the spiritual exercises. His studies, sermons and reflections on tapes comprise a phenomenology, a description, of worship. These studies supply clues to the nature and meaning of the worship experience. Moreover, these clues pertain to the psychological, the aesthetic, the nonverbal and the theological dimensions of the sacred. In addition, Thurman's analysis of the soul's spiritual search for wholeness treats a host of important issues related to worship. Some examples of these issues are: problems of alienation and marginality, satisfactions related to identity and shared values, as well as a phenomenological and theological examination of disappointment, grief and fulfillment.

Structure, anti-structure, counter-structure and nonstructure (chaos) are points of departure for worship. Also, these features are part of the functions and fruits of worship. Happily, Thurman's vision of the sacred assumes that worship is an experience which discloses the scope of the evil resident in the soul, in society, in the nation, and in the world. Accordingly, worship as a quest for the sacred, as a search for the unity in all instances of existence, is the most central, creative and crucial activity of the human spirit.

³¹ Cf. the book, *Deep Is The Hunger*, by Thurman.

³² Dr. Thurman has written over twenty books and many articles.