

Article

Good News for the Oppressed? Exploring the Spiritual, Political, and Intercultural Dimensions of Howard Thurman's Philosophy

Aizaiah G. Yong 

Practical Theology, Claremont School of Theology, Los Angeles, CA 91107, USA; ayong@cst.edu

Abstract: This paper centers on the godfather of the civil rights movement, Howard Thurman, and his most influential work, *“Jesus and the Disinherited”*, as a pre-eminent text into early 20th century intercultural philosophy. Building upon Kipton Jensen’s analysis in *“Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground”*, this presentation will reframe Howard Thurman’s unique philosophy as one that integrates spirituality, interculturality, and critical social analysis. It is well known that Thurman’s treatise on the oppressed was carried in the pocket of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. throughout the civil rights movement for the ways it empowered nonviolent resistance for those marginalized by the dominant culture of the United States, which was (and still is) built on racism, military violence, and class-based oppression. This paper advocates that Thurman came to his philosophical conclusions through deep engagement with various cultural and philosophical traditions, most notably the Hindu spiritual–political paradigm of *Mahatma* Gandhi, and sought to harmonize these insights for African Americans in the USA. By investigating the intercultural foundations of *“Jesus and the Disinherited”*, this paper will encourage scholars to explore how interculturality enriched Thurman’s philosophy and how this fostered a more expansive vision of community in pluralistic societies. This article traces the roots of the development of *“Jesus and the Disinherited”*, looking back to presentations Thurman gave as early as 1922, concluding with the publication of his book in 1949. And via this study, we will see the progression of Thurman’s ideas and the impacts interculturality had on his philosophy and vision for social justice.

Keywords: mysticism; social justice; spirituality; inter-racial; intercultural; inter-religious



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1. Introduction

Howard Thurman (1899–1981) was seen as a “godfather of the civil rights movement”, truly a multi-dimensional genius who lived beyond any one label or definition (Brown 2023)—Scholar–Intellectual, Teacher–Educator, Pastor–Preacher, and Spiritual–Mystic. What makes all these aspects of his life even more interesting is that he was an African American man living amidst the terror of racial oppression within the United States in the early twentieth century and bore witness to a vision of racial justice and mutual liberation alongside diverse others. Thurman was well aware of the violations and challenges that marginalized communities faced historically and in the present and sought to engage them by transforming life using one’s deepest interiority (Yong 2023). To use Thurman’s own words, his life could be described as one lived with his “back against the wall” and attempting to bear witness to a “technique of survival for the oppressed” in the lineage of Jesus of Nazareth (Thurman 1949, pp. xxvii). While Thurman is widely known to be a leading precursor to Black liberation theology or the Black social gospel, the civil rights movement, and inter-religiosity, why is it that Thurman is often relegated to pre-status (Prince 2023)? Why is his work looked to as a prologue for someone or something else, and why is he not taken more seriously as a philosopher at large beyond any one cultural tradition? Perhaps it is because he wrote with a timeless spirit aimed toward a “distant progeny” (Jensen 2019, p. 142). And while I agree that his aims were beyond his own lifetime, I also contend it was because of his radically integrative and intercultural

persuasion that many in his time did not (and perhaps many today still do not) understand. Therefore, the thrust of my purpose with this article is to detail the interculturality embedded within Thurman's approach to mysticism, social justice, and philosophy at large. Furthering this intuition, I offer at least three reasons for his neglect as an intercultural philosopher: (1) Thurman was well trained in the study and practice of religion, philosophy, and education across diverse communities, creatively weaving together the three, refusing to allow anyone to predominate; (2) Thurman embodied and called forth a spirituality that was radically nonviolent, what he understood as the love ethic and religion of Jesus; and (3) he chose to insist upon a spiritual and social vision of integration requiring a great deal from each person to overcome and transform fear, hypocrisy, and hatred within the core of being. Ultimately, it appears it was due to his interculturality that many did not fully grasp the far-reaching implications of his philosophy. To this day, many have chosen to focus attention and critical analysis upon the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, or other well-known public figures of social change movements, all the while Thurman has only in the last few years begun to be centered across theological, philosophical, and educational domains of inquiry (Ellison 2021). A more sustained study of his life and thought can cultivate greater creativity, passion, and a sense of belonging, which are all important in the pluralistic societies of today.

2. Thurman in Context

In order to understand and appreciate Thurman's life, philosophy, and spiritual vision, one must first understand the context in which he lived. Thurman's life was primarily characterized by an incessant hunger and spiritual longing for deeper spiritual integration, attempting to be faithful to his initial and ongoing experiences with the divine from a young age. In *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Thurman 1961), Howard Thurman wrote that "mysticism is defined as the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own spirit." Although there is also evidence that Thurman grew increasingly weary of using the term mysticism to describe his work due to a "medley of confusion" around it in the later years of his life, it is clear that direct spiritual encounter is key to his entire thought (Thurman 1973, p. 5). And he came to his own understanding of the sacred via a series of mystical experiences as a child. Thurman wrote of his first religious experience at oceanside in his autobiography, *With Head and Heart* (Thurman 1981, pp. 7–8), reflecting "The ocean and the night together surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances. Death would be a minor thing, I felt, in the sweep of that natural embrace. . . . Again, the boundaries of self did not hold me. Unafraid, I was held by the storms' embrace. The experience of these storms gave me a certain overriding immunity against much of the pain with which I would have to deal in the years ahead when the ocean was only a memory. The sense held: I felt rooted in life, in nature, in existence."

He reflected upon another nature-based religious experience, as an eleven-year-old boy when Halley's Comet passed across the sky and terrified him. "One night I was awakened by my mother, who asked if I would like to see the comet. I got up, dressed quickly, and went out with her to the back yard. There I saw in the heavens the awesome tail of the comet and stood transfixed. With deep anxiety I asked, without taking my eyes off it, 'What will happen to us when that thing falls out of the sky?' There was a long silence during which I felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on my shoulders; then I looked into her face and saw what I had seen on another occasion, when without knocking I had rushed into her room and found her in prayer. At last she said, 'Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us.' In that moment something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me. As I look back on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet. It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fear and stilled my panic" (Schaper and Thurman 2009, p. 32). Thurman was not only graced with ecstatic

experiences of connectedness in nature but also understood that cosmic forces were also present as strength available within himself to confront the oppressive powers at work in society (Robinson 2021).

Due to these powerful nature-based experiences he endured, Thurman longed to walk a path in harmony with the sacred with other human beings and the cosmos at large. And he spent the entirety of his life seeking to integrate his profound sense of the sacred available to all people, beginning with the plight of marginalized experiences and communities. As a result, Thurman's life led him to pursue others who could understand his convictions about inner life and the liberation of the oppressed. First, he studied mysticism with the well-known Quaker theologian and philosopher Rufus Jones, who emphasized the "inner light" of each person and sought to affirm the relationship between Christianity and modern science (Holt 2022). Thurman later translated Jones' insight to the "sound of the genuine" within each person and the call to listen more deeply within to effect positive social change (Thurman 1980). Thurman's journey and questions then led him on an inter-religious and intercultural pilgrimage of friendship from 1935 to 1936, where he held multiple informal, private, and public meetings (many of which were even devoted to sharing the ideas of famous African American philosopher Booker T. Washington) as well as convened with various leaders and intellectuals across South Asia, such as Rabindranath Tagore and Kshitimohan Sen, as well as Mahatma Gandhi. While the meeting with Tagore was disappointing for Thurman, the meeting with Sen was a prime example of the intercultural mysticism to which Thurman gave his life, describing it as "a watershed experience" as he described in his autobiography that "we had become part of each other even as we remained essentially individual" (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. lxxv). After this encounter, Thurman met with Gandhi, the Hindu spiritual teacher, philosopher, and activist who spoke on the message of ahimsa and satyagraha, a theory and practice of nonviolent resistance based on the philosophical ethic of no-harm. His second wife, Sue Bailey Thurman (an activist, educator, and intellectual in her own right who seriously impacted Thurman's thought (Brown 2023), played a prominent role in this delegation and was highly involved in leading the proceedings. While Thurman was in India, he was asked a very troubling question, namely why does he consider himself a Christian, a religion that has been weaponized against African American people for so long (Dixie and Eisenstadt 2011)? Thurman's response was one he had been giving since as early as 1932 (especially to other African Americans who believed Thurman's acceptance of Christianity was only perpetuating the racial oppression against their communities (Harvey 2020)) and that he understood Jesus' historical and lived religious experience to be deeply attuned to that of minoritized communities as Jesus himself was culturally, socio-economically, and politically subservient under the Roman imperial occupation. Via Thurman's study of Jesus, he also saw how echoes of the Roman imperial system impacts extended to the present-day United States context (Thurman and Fluker 2009). And it was thanks to Thurman's visit with Gandhi and their freedom movement against British colonial rule that Thurman was able to refine and deepen his philosophy, which aimed to support collective liberation in the United States. Thurman left his meeting with Gandhi internalizing his message as one of the closest living examples who embodied Jesus' teachings of love and led to the publication of his most famous book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Thurman 1949), where he detailed how the spiritual vitality of a person could transform the "three hounds of hell: fear, hypocrisy, and hatred" creating personal action and social renewal.

Although it is well documented that Thurman's philosophy of the disinherited guided the civil rights movements and their leaders, it was also true that his ideas were not always well received by the vast majority of white Christians or African Americans at the popular level, likely because it demanded a great deal of reflection and intercultural engagement. One of Thurman's first congregational interns, Rev. Alfred Cleage Jr., became increasingly disturbed by Thurman's insistence on racial integration because he did not believe that whites could, in fact, be trustworthy allies in the struggle for African American freedom and

chose to leave Thurman's leadership eventually leading him to become a prominent Black nationalist movement leader in the 1960s (Zubovich 2019; Thurman and Fluker 2015). But even amidst his detractors, Thurman persisted in his commitment to radical nonviolence, which required a spiritual and philosophical vision built upon relationality with all of life rather than separateness. Thurman's conviction was that direct spiritual or mystical experience was the sustenance required to live life abundantly and was the resource one could draw upon to overcome the calamities of life, whether it be psychospiritual in nature such as anxiety or anger stemming from societal violence and oppression (Crozier 2013). Thurman knew from direct experience that if the oppressed person could arrive at the awareness of inherent belovedness, it would be the needed antidote for low self-esteem, which is common for marginalized communities to internalize after years of oppression (Thurman and Fluker 2009) and what would provide creative avenues to extend care to all beings, creating new paths toward flourishing for all. When Thurman reflected on the nature of love it was a "robust vitality that quickens the roots of personality, creating an unfolding of the self that redefines, reshapes, and makes all things new" (Thurman 1963, p. 123). Thurman's relational understanding of love was definitively influenced by the likes of Josiah Royce in his adoption of the vision for Beloved Community. Subsequently, for Thurman, the most important task of a leader in that time was to lead "a way to unite people of great ideological and religious diversity through experiences which were more compelling than the concepts that separated and divided" (Jensen 2019, p. 131). For Thurman, virtue in a pluralistic society could only occur via a relationship with one another rather than assuming if individuals pursue their own individual agendas, it will benefit the whole. Therefore, Thurman's philosophy was a major critique of the modern liberal agenda of society, which depends upon the self-determined and self-sufficient individual. Thurman called for people to come together and learn how to live more deeply in communion with the sacred and one another. Of course, this is easier said than done, and there are many debates about how effective this actually is (including the recognition that in a truly diverse community, conflict and disagreement is natural and should be expected (Panikkar 2004; Jensen 2019)), but regardless of where one lands on the debate, it remains evident that Thurman's philosophy prioritized the experiences of those who were living on the margins of society and called for new intercultural communities to exist that understood suffering acutely and responded with integrative visions for the human person.

3. Thurman's Transformation: From Good News for the Underprivileged to a Fellowship for All Peoples

While tracing the chronological and biographical events of Thurman's life at large is of vital significance and has been undertaken in breathtaking fashion via *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*, edited by Walter Earl Fluker volumes 1–5 (2009–2019), *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman* (Eisenstadt 2021) by Peter Eisenstadt, and *Howard Thurman and the disinherited: A Religious Biography* by Paul Harvey (2020), none detail the transformations of Thurman as an intercultural philosopher who spent his life sincerely wrestling and changing his thinking on questions of his own personal experience and identity, religious orientation of origin, and socio-political struggles of his time. While the summative conclusions of his philosophy can be found in the book *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Thurman 1949), I contend his true insights cannot be appreciated without recounting various intercultural moments and shifts within his thought from the years of 1922–1949. As a graduating university student from Morehouse College in 1922, Thurman delivered a speech entitled "Our Challenge", where he clearly demonstrates his sensitivity to the "struggle for existence" which defines the experience of African Americans in the United States, and he acknowledges the limitations of the myth of racial progress and takes his place as an orator and intellectual within the African American philosophical tradition delivering the annual emancipation proclamation address which was a well-established ritual in the late 19th century (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 22). In this speech, the influences of African American philosopher Mordecai Wyatt Johnson were apparent as

he was one of Thurman's most significant mentors, encouraging him to take his place in "being one among the few well trained thinkers and leaders who will have the destiny of our people in their keeping" (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 5). In this speech, it is also evident of other philosophical influences (outside African Americans) upon him such as John Dewey's whom he studied at Columbia University the preceding summer and which he acknowledged gifted him with a "basic methodological approach to problem solving in all fields of investigation, from simple decision-making to the understanding and treatment of disease and the most confused patterns of human behavior" (Jensen 2019, p. 109). Later on, as Thurman was finishing his graduate training at Rochester Theological Seminary, he wrote a paper entitled "Can it Truly be Said that the Existence of a Supreme Spirit Is a Scientific Hypothesis?" where he developed his philosophical connections to the Neo-Kantian tradition à la his Canadian advisor George Cross and humanist thinker E.A. Burt from Columbia University, asserting that religious experience and values precede rationalism, which developed the basis for his emphasis on the importance of religious experience in attaining knowledge (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 54). In 1927, Thurman wrote an article entitled "Higher Education and Religion", where he challenges African American colleges and universities to educate students beyond escapist or otherworldly religious visions (which he saw as anti-illlectual), all while "staying clear of Marxism in any systematic way" and its critique of religion (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. lxxv). In this article, the influences of John Hope, another mixed-race, African American thinker, emerge as he cautioned of the other extreme, which seeks salvation in economic power primarily and advocates instead for an education that cultivates spiritual maturity and authentic community with an eye toward hope and courage (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 118). Thurman "credited Hope with the foresight to create an environment whereby young black men could experience themselves as human beings with dignity. . ." (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. xlvi). One year later, Thurman speaks on this subject again and re-titles the speech "The Task of Negro Ministry", where he doubles down on his insistence that true power from within is greater than a "demand for things", critiquing "materialism, apocalypticism, and institutionalism" while advocating for integration between religion and science; it is also in this speech where Thurman draws upon an array of cultural philosophy weaving together African spirituals, the thought of South African poet and feminist, Olive Schreiner, as well as the Zulu African tradition ending his words with an appeal from a Zulu proverb (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 144). In 1930, his first wife, Kate Thurman, died from tuberculosis, and he reflected upon this experience as one of the most difficult of his life, teaching him about the transformational power of enduring suffering where he wrote, "the test of life is to be found in the amount of pain one can absorb without spoiling joy" (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 174) and this grueling experience certainly deepened his sensibilities to the transformation, which could be attained through trial and tribulation. Two years later, in 1932, Thurman spoke on the topic of "the Kind of Religion a Negro Needs in Times Like These", where he first emphasized Jesus as a teacher hailing from minoritized communities offering inner strength and a way of survival wedding Christian religion with critical African American philosophical analysis which was birthed through the tutelage of African American philosopher, Benjamin E. Mays, and taught him "the ability to engage in critical analysis of the underlying presuppositions of society" (Thurman 1949; Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. xlvi). In this speech, he validated the importance of oppressed communities learning from the spiritual teachings of Jesus Christ and, more importantly, experiencing him within so that it would enable a deeper sense of meaning, fullness, and joy in life. Later, in 1935, he retitled his speech "Good News for the Underprivileged" where he boldly distinguished between the historical teachings of Paul as a social conservative in juxtaposition to Jesus of Nazareth, who was a revolutionary and taught a countercultural way that subverts ways of living that are dominating to others (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 263). Thurman understood African American communities as having a unique opportunity to overcome the twofold challenges of contemporary Christianity in the US; on one hand, an "inferiority" that does not challenge the status

quo and a “cockiness” on the other hand that dismisses religious experience as containing essential qualities for thriving in life (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. lxxv). In the early stages, Thurman focused on Christianity exclusively but continued to develop his ideas during his trip to India in the 1930s, where he discovered the power of nonviolent thinking and practice, translating his sensibilities into a poetic vision entitled “The Great Incarnate Words” in *The Motive* (Thurman 1944) from which I will share a portion:

- *“And thy neighbor?*
- *Any man whose need of thee lays claim: Friend and foe alike.*
- *Thou must not make division.*
- *Thy mind, heart, soul and strength must ever search*
- *To find the way by which the road To all men’s need of thee must go.*
- *This is the Highway of the Lord.*

In reflecting upon his poem, one stark observation can be made, and that is his move away from American Christianity exclusively or even a focus on the conditions of the oppressed within the United States (while both remain central) to a more universal call urging all sincere lovers of wisdom (whether from science, humanist, or various other cultural traditions) to find a path that accepts and transforms hatred and fear of the other within the core of being. Looking at Thurman’s progression, one can see how Thurman exemplifies a philosopher par excellence, a lover of wisdom who taught his ideas most profoundly by modeling a journey of transformation within himself. Thurman began as an apologist for American Christianity and later recognized the path of wisdom could not be profoundly realized through only one’s religion or culture of origin but through intercultural relationships and encounters and, most importantly, through living one’s life in a conscious way. While Thurman’s work at large is still Christian-centric, it opens the possibilities for renewing and re-imagining contemporary religiousness outside of monocultural paradigms by prioritizing spiritual experience and social transformation in diverse settings. For Thurman, virtue and genuine societal engagement can only be birthed from the pursuit and direct experience of existential love—wherever and with whomever (human or more than human life included) it may be found.

From his own growing awareness of the value of spirituality, diversity, and socially transformative living, Thurman was invited to co-found the nation’s first inter-racial and intercultural church in San Francisco with a white philosopher from San Francisco State College, Alfred Fisk. Its name was the Church for the Fellowship of All People’s, and their aim was not to build up a great institution but to provide spiritual education and support for seekers toward encountering a personal and vital experience of God, which translates to authentic fellowship with one another. Their goal, as Thurman put it, to “grow in understanding of all men as sons of God, and a vital experience of God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth and other great religious spirits whose fellowship with God was the foundation of their fellowship with men” (Thurman 1981, p. 143). In this short quote, it is evident that Thurman wanted the church to grow out of a distinctly Protestant Christian heritage but transcend it due to its unwavering commitment to racial and cultural integration. Thurman lamented how Christian Protestantism at the time was stuck in paradigms of segregation and hierarchy and could not find a path toward authentic friendship (Thurman and Fluker 2015). Thurman, in the spirit of W.E.B. Dubois, was committed to communal education as a way toward embodying the justice and healing that was long overdue in US society at large, and he recognized this can only occur via diverse people genuinely caring for one another.

For Thurman, as a philosophical personalist and prophetic pragmatist, as Jensen (2019) suggest, the transformation of a society starts and ends within the innermost of each person and to resist an individualized or sanitized approach to the pain and sufferings of the oppressed in society. Both Fisk and Thurman believed that the power of religion is most profound when it is serious about those vulnerable to violence or harm and calls all truth-seeking people in society to become engaged. When this happens, a beloved community would form that would undergo the long and deep transformational work of confronting fear, hatred, anger, and deception (understanding them yet refusing to

remain captive to them) within themselves and in the world. They understood their community of practice to be essential to any chance at a viable future for democracy in the US, and their community embraced insights from a variety of diverse religious traditions and their leadership structure was shared across racial and cultural divides. Thurman's philosophical approach to integration is one that builds upon the Black philosophical tradition, the mystical encounters of each person, relationality to learn from the experiences of one other, and creative social engagement calling for all to live from a fullness that is a direct contradiction to the status quo of society.

4. Thurman as a Philosopher of Intercultural Transformation

As I argued previously, Thurman's life and thought have been overlooked due to the interdisciplinary and spiritually focused approach he advocated, which was often frowned upon by the academic elite who preferred rationalism or for Black intellectuals who desired a more separatist vision of Black liberation. The former was a lifelong struggle for Thurman as he sought to identify why he did not believe the Christian message was one of "betrayal" into the hands of [whites] those who wanted to dominate (Harvey 2020). Yet, as we reviewed Thurman's transformational personal journey, we find the connections he makes between mysticism, theology, philosophy, education, and social change, all stem from his own intercultural experiences. In my view, Thurman is a philosopher of intercultural transformation because he was deeply dedicated to integration on all accounts while respecting differences and individuation. Consequently, it is the core of interculturality that provides the biggest foundation for his vision of social change. For it is by engaging life holistically (via mysticism and spirituality, communities of belonging, and collaborative social action) that Thurman proclaim can make the largest and most lasting difference. In final conclusion, I suggest how viewing Thurman as a philosopher of intercultural transformation invites possibilities for renewing each domain and embodying social justice in pluralistic societies.

First and foremost, he understood mysticism and spirituality as that which could allow fear to fall to the wayside. In Thurman's work, mystical experiences can offer people a sense of deep affection and regard, and it is from this that genuine relations with the rest of life can be deepened. While the dominance of society continues in patterns of violence, intimidation, and individualistic hierarchies, a focus on intercultural mysticism counters by emphasizing the unique cultural expressions of belovedness and how they deepen each other. One example of this is the nonviolence he learned from South Asia and how that helped Thurman clarify the kind of social action needed in the US context. For Thurman, mysticism also produces an overcoming of the fear of failure or rejection from those in power (both are struggles shared by others across cultural contexts, and so, the mystical awareness and assurance he advocates for are best realized via intercultural exchange, which in turn creates perseverance and a willingness to continue on toward the pursuit of spiritual growth and destiny regardless of obstacle, setback, or struggle.

Now, for some critics, an appreciation for mysticism may seem to be simply wishful thinking or idealistic as it does not deal with the harsh realities or facts of life (for example, the unthinkable violence committed by people to one another, the ecological degradation and destruction that is human-caused, or the trauma and abuse perpetrated by those who are supposed to nurture, protect, and guide)—at worst, it could seemingly justify perpetuation of the worst and violent forms of imperial religiosity. In response to this, Thurman spoke fiercely about the difference between mysticism as "listening to the sound of the genuine" versus institutional forms of religion that re-entrenched segregation and the status quo (which for him was based on the supreme self-reliant individual). Thurman saw this essentialized (and race-based) identity as incompatible with the religion of Jesus or other spiritual teachers who embodied love and justice for oppressed persons. In addition, Thurman saw the religion of Jesus as something that brought spiritual restoration and agency to people so they could enhance their capacities to transform the violence of society within themselves and all their relations—it did not, however, promise a pain- or suffering-

free life. For Thurman, any message about a consciousness of love or justice or solidarity or belonging starts a spirituality that is authentic and available to those whose backs are against the wall and can only be concretized through intercultural partnerships such as the one he had co-founded, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, with Alfred Fisk.

Secondly, in the educational domain, Thurman practiced a method that was deeply pragmatic, relational, and dialogical across cultural experiences. Thurman did not believe learning could take place purely in the realm of idea exchange in homogenous settings but required encounters with people from all walks of life. He called his trip to India a pilgrimage of friendship because he believed that learning happens best in living relationships with others. Thurman's pedagogical gifts were on display during his various appointments as the Dean of Rankin Chapel and full-time faculty member at Morehouse College, Howard University (teaching up to 10 classes per year on subjects ranging from philosophy, religion, theology, biblical studies, and history) (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 167) and also as the first African American Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. Thurman's intercultural pedagogy often landed him in trouble as he sought to de-center monoculturality wherever he could.

Finally, when it comes to engaged social action, Thurman taught about the importance of radical nonviolence or the love ethic of Jesus as a collaborative effort conducted by all parties in society. He validated the feelings of resentment and even hatred, which would have been normal to feel as a member of the oppressed group, but called for it all to be transformed into a sincerity and simplicity of heart that seeks the best for all by speaking the truth about their identity as a beloved of God. Thurman wrote, "it is necessary therefore, for the privileged and under-privileged to work in the common environment for the purpose of providing normal experiences of fellowship...the first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value. This cannot be discovered in a hypothetical, it has to be in a real situation, natural, free." (Thurman 1949, p. 88) In other words, Thurman's approach was to invite all members of a society to an authentic and living intercultural community that was rooted in spiritual experience as the key to overcoming societal barriers, which were often re-enacted and perpetuated through both inner and structural processes.

Ultimately, weaving these three together demonstrates the brilliance of Thurman's philosophy, although it was gravely misunderstood in his own time. We see Thurman's philosophy as one that harmonized diverse cultural insights, the paradox of contemplation and action, critically engaged suffering, and inspired social justice, as well as danced between individuation and an ethic of solidarity. Thurman's work was well ahead of its time, and its recovery is vital as the world turns to more widespread encounters with differences of all kinds. Hence, I deem Thurman a philosopher of intercultural transformation who would not have arrived at any of these conclusions (or been as inspiring to the civil rights) were it not for his own mysticism and spirituality, intercultural friendships, and his lived experience as an African American male who brought together wisdom from African American, South Asian, South African, and Euroamerican traditions, providing resources for communities to believe another way beyond violence was possible.

5. Conclusions

Uplifting the spiritual, intercultural, and social dimensions of Howard Thurman's philosophy demonstrates the rich diversity of African American philosophy and beckons a clarion call to living in the paradox of contemplation and action from the perspectives of those who are most vulnerable in society. Thurman did not believe transformation can come from ideas alone or one religious tradition exclusively but must be discovered in an authentic relationship with oneself, one's community, and in light of the larger social realities of one's time. Therefore, Thurman's life and work call for philosophy today to be an interdisciplinary, experiential, and relational task lived out via intercultural encounters where the experiences and stories of the most vulnerable are front and center. It asks for philosophers to be deeply grounded in the most difficult experiences in life and what

it means to live together in a pluralistic age where conflicts, injustice, and violence are prevalent. Thurman's philosophy of transformation invites the possibility that education centers around direct experiences of and with sacred, diverse cultural traditions, and radical social engagement. May we be inspired by Thurman's philosophical approach, which insists upon the authentic and inner freedom of each participant and presupposes humility, self-awareness, and a desire for ongoing transformation where no one perspective can fully take center stage but can only be realized in beloved community together. While the call is weighty and requires inner fortitude, a dependence on encounters with the sacred, and a persevering spirit, it also promises possibilities for overcoming the seeming impasses within self, others, and the world via unlikely relationships of love.

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