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Stephanie Athey
Stetson University

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Building on a Radical Foundation: The Work of Theologian Howard Thurman Continues

by Stephanie Athey

Howard Thurman (1900–1981), whose life spanned most of this century, was a prodigious intellect and a pioneering theologian; his persistent effort, especially over the period of 1930s–1960s, to grapple with racism and classism within American Christianity paved the way for intellectual, political and religious leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr. Through his contact with Mahatma Gandhi, Thurman became convinced that African Americans might bring the “unadulterated message of non-violence to all people everywhere.”¹ Determined to find a moral and practical method to unite the concerns of the human spirit and the immediate material and social needs of disenfranchised people, Thurman moved against the advice of his own mentors and the racial proscriptions and patriotic zeal of Cold War Christianity. His study of Native American and Eastern spiritualities, his growing international frame of reference, his exploration of mysticism and suspicion of formal creeds as divisive, all distinguished him within an American and a Black tradition of religious practice.

As a preacher and an educator, Thurman’s teaching in San Francisco’s innovative Fellowship Church of All Peoples, and at Oberlin College, Morehouse College, Howard University, and Boston University challenged the assumptions of white institutions and reached beyond national and doctrinal boundaries to insist on the power of religious experience to create human community among diverse groups, religions and cultures. This is a rich and weighty legacy, one which his home community of Daytona Beach, Florida, means to test and extend as it opens a new venture in inter-faith, inter-cultural education and community relations.

The Howard Thurman Program in Daytona Beach creates a partnership between Stetson University, an elite and historically white liberal arts college in nearby DeLand, and a Miami-based non-profit organization, New Birth, Inc. With the assistance of historically Black college Bethune-Cookman of Daytona Beach, the program seeks to integrate scholars with religious and civic leaders to seek solutions to social, religious, racial and ethnic problems. The program was inaugurated in Spring 1996 under the leadership of the Reverend Jefferson P. Rogers, a student of Howard Thurman and himself deeply involved in the Civil Rights struggle. Rogers was an early member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and president of that

organization’s Washington D.C. chapter for seven years. Rogers describes the program as a watershed effort to make the academic work of the university relevant to the social action needs of communities—an exciting and formidable goal.

The promise and challenge of meaningful cooperation between Black and white private institutions in this region and at the end of this decade are equally large. It is with those challenges in mind that one must explore Thurman’s work and test its relevance for the 1990s. Thurman’s own experience has much to teach about the limits and possibilities of institutional collaboration and transformation. The Howard Thurman Program is based at the Daytona Beach home where Thurman was born. His grandmother’s appeal to local authorities enabled Thurman to be the first African-American child to take the eighth grade examination, which induced the Negro public school to extend its curriculum through that grade. In Daytona, young Thurman absorbed the determination and example of Thurman family friend, educator Mary McLeod Bethune who founded her school for young women just a short distance from his home. His own education led him north to Morehouse and then to Rochester Theological Seminary in New York. Graduating from that institution in 1926, he was ordained a Baptist minister, and after teaching at Oberlin and Morehouse, went on to serve as a faculty member and eventually Dean of Chapel at Howard University. In 1935 he was invited to lead the first African American and Christian delegation to India and to meet with Gandhi in the midst of India’s anti-colonial struggle.

Thurman’s independent study prior to his travel in India, Burma, and Ceylon was marked by prolonged, serious engagement with mysticism. His consideration of the inner life and the interrelatedness of all life led him to an understanding of the individual’s contact with God as a call, not to retreat from the world, but to total involvement in all its details. Religious experience brought one into a full mutual responsibility for guarding and affirming life and for ensuring the survival and sustenance of human community. He experimented with forms of worship that enabled meditation and nourishment of the inner life, creating—in his belief—a space in which people meet unbound by particularities of creed, gender, race, class, politics or nation. Though encouraged by the success of these experiments, Thurman continued to seek the mechanism by which spiritual unity and transcendence might activate social transformation and might alter the historical and institutional structures which resisted unity and suppressed life in his own society.

Thurman describes the travel abroad and his contact with Gandhi as life changing. His experience in India sharpened the paradox he already keenly felt as an African-American ambassador of Christianity come to address those oppressed by British colonialism. He came to share knowledge of African Americans, yet he did so standing as a representative of a religion which had efficiently carried out the work of imperialism and sustained its effects in his own country. He was

interrogated sharply on this score throughout India. If Christianity were powerless before the color bar, then what could he possibly have to share with the peoples of India that had any meaning? Thurman felt the conflict acutely, as he expressed it, “What is the anatomy of the process by which the powerful and powerless draw their support and inspiration from the same God and their teachings from the same source?”² Gandhi’s questions probed the same point: given the present condition of African Americans, the function of churches, the historic relationship between American slavery and Christianity—how had African Americans survived? why had enslaved Americans not turned to the inclusiveness of Islam?³

Thurman returned to Howard, eventually to resign his tenured position and prestigious post as Dean of Chapel. In 1944, determined to follow his conviction that Christianity could be a vehicle for social change, he left for San Francisco to co-found and pastor the innovative Fellowship Church of All Peoples. There he joined a small but committed group of white, Black and Asian American parishioners in an experiment which forthrightly challenged American racial segregation. Putting Thurman’s own teaching to a test in post-war California, in the wake of Japanese internment, the church had a steady, if indirect, impact on the climate of race relations in the area. It grew from the original core of fifty to some 200 resident members and, interestingly, approximately 1000-at-large members. Those in the latter group, like many other political figures and celebrities, sought out Thurman as guide and counsel; some of these included Josephine Baker, Eleanor Roosevelt, Alan Paton, Whitney Young, Vernon Jordan, and Jesse Jackson. The list speaks to Thurman’s impact on his contemporaries and the generation to come; it speaks as well to his growing prominence.

By 1953, Thurman’s extensive writings, his preaching and successful attempts to build an interracial community of fellowship caught the attention of the white media. *Life* magazine in that year named Thurman the only African American among “twelve of the country’s most eminent preachers.”⁴ That same year Thurman accepted an invitation to assume the position of Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, where his innovations in worship and his writing on spiritual and social action continued. Knowing that a university setting offered greater potential for outreach and dissemination, he also came promising an “eye-level encounter” with a Black man would be an experience unsettling to that institution.⁵ In the end this was precisely the case. After ten years, by Thurman’s own account, the life of Marsh Chapel had grown into a nonsectarian, intercultural experience that challenged the structure and control of the university. It revealed what Thurman called the “intrinsic contradiction” and ultimately problematic nature of religious freedom within an institutional arrangement.⁶ This problem was deepened by Thurman’s own theological and social commitments. As the Dean of the School of Theology put it at the time, “The mystic is seldom an organization man. Those who avoid the securities of...doctrine or sacrament or

institution—and insist on speaking in public—give uneasy hours to the ecclesiastical bureaucrat.”⁷

Thurman devised a religious practice of unity in the era of legal racial segregation.

Many components of Thurman’s legacy are apt for the current work in Florida’s Daytona Beach. As a former student of Thurman and Director of the program, Reverend Rogers draws on Thurman’s emphasis on authentic education relevant to the political and social climate of the day, the role of the Black Church as a social instrument, and the capacity of religious experience to forge unity in action across barriers of race, class, religion, and region. Yet the challenges which face such an enterprise in the 1990s are far different than those which Thurman confronted. Thurman devised a religious practice of unity in the era of legal racial segregation. His work rose on the optimistic cusp of the Civil Rights Movement—before long sought after civil rights legislation came up short and Black Power rethought the possibility of racial cooperation in the work of anti-racist, anti-colonial struggle for Black empowerment. The contemporary effort in Thurman’s name returns to the counties of Central Florida in an era of racial retrenchment and pessimism. This is an area in which, just this past year, Supreme Court findings on racial apportionment in legislative districts have remapped voting districts; John Singleton’s on-site filming of the historical Rosewood massacre has stirred local discomfort and Klan grumbling; the county sheriff has been reelected (narrowly and with lengthy contestation) in spite of a controversial policy targeting Black and Latino motorists for impromptu drug inspection; and just two hours away in St. Petersburg, riots over police violence caught national attention this fall. Jefferson Rogers, Stetson University and Bethune-Cookman College take up this work in a region that is culturally rich—with a longstanding African-American community, a strong resident Mexican presence and rapidly growing Puerto Rican population.

While federal laws have attempted to force some measure of cooperation between state sponsored white and Black educational institutions over the last thirty years, this has not been the case with private colleges. Few models for deeply cooperative relationships exist. In a 1995 exchange between administrators and faculty of Millsaps and Tougaloo in Jackson, Mississippi, the group publicly assessed its history in this regard.⁸ Moments of collaboration were student inspired (in the late 1960s) and not nurtured or sustained institutionally. Institutional structures must be adapted and the commitment—political and financial—to do so must come from the upper levels of the universities’ administration. Stetson and Bethune-Cookman haven’t even this checkered past to show. And the institutional commitment which will nourish and sustain collaboration, though given an enormous boost by

the program funding from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, is still in developmental stages.

The key to this cooperative venture in university and community relations will be, clearly, a deep reeducation of the educators themselves. In a prologue to this work, Rogers evocatively called for a “cultural renaissance” within the Black community of the Daytona Beach area and announced the need for what, of necessity, must amount to an educational renaissance as well, the “creation of a pedagogy that is not irrelevant to community needs.”⁹ Stetson is a private college in a conservative and white Southern Baptist tradition, yet one struggling to grapple with the meaning of that heritage as it seeks to redefine its mission multiculturally. The extent to which an agenda of religious and racial freedom can transform the routines and structures of an institution is a lesson Howard Thurman’s life can teach, and a lesson that proves quite difficult to learn. It suggests the teachers themselves must be taught. Goodwill can coexist with the ill-effects of what Rogers terms “contemporary euphemistic pedagogy, and politically prudent praxis.”¹⁰ Neither necessarily alters an institution’s reluctance to address “chronic facts” concerning the survival needs of people in the immediate vicinity.

This philosophy promises to invert in vigorous fashion the elite and traditionally Western model of education which has structured our national norms and the paternalist model of philanthropy which exists as deeply rooted Southern tradition. Only the community can save the university, not the other way around as universities have grown comfortable believing.

“The university often indicts itself” says Rogers. “My concern is the academic weakness of institutions whose sense of their own functional superiority is grounded on an academic ableness that in fact they lack. There is a pride in ostensible authority which is simply lacking. If the academy becomes responsible you create an institution which is both radical and revolutionary. ‘Radical’ means ‘right.’ You don’t build a house on anything other than a radical foundation.”¹¹

Thurman’s theology and practice were certainly radical in this sense, providing strong foundations for those in the Black Church, like King, who went on to make the Church a point of mobilization. Thurman himself had difficulty adapting his theology of unity in worship to a systematic dismantling of institutional structures and a widespread program of social change. For Thurman, the Church was a resource for activists, a point of nourishment and meditation not of agitation. The test for any program now in Central Florida will be how well it harnesses these twin impulses of Black church tradition, the educational and transformational, and extends those in a socially progressive manner to suit the needs of the place and climate.

New Birth Incorporated and Stetson University

The idea for Stetson University’s partnership with New Birth grew out of two years of talks between Rogers and

Stetson Institute for Christian Ethics Director, Dixon Sutherland. The Jessie Ball duPont Fund has extended Stetson a two-year grant contingent on Stetson’s commitment to match that amount in the following two years. The Thurman Program will focus on three fronts. First, community programming will extend from the Daytona Beach Thurman House and the Cultural Park now being negotiated with the City of Daytona Beach for development on the Thurman property and adjacent land. A key venture will be the Rites of Passage Project, an educational and social opportunity for youth modeled on Darryl Kennon’s successful program of that name in Baltimore, Maryland. On a second front, the Thurman Program will help to establish the Thurman-Ashe Preparatory School, an academy focusing on providing excellence in education to area youth. The third element of the Thurman Program is designed to convene scholars and community leaders locally and nationally for the earnest and ongoing work of interracial and interfaith dialogue. Stetson will serve as an academic and educational base and partner with which the Program will host a variety of lecture series, student internships, ecumenical conferences and cultural events. Noted participants in the series’ first year will include religious leaders Samuel DeWitt Proctor, as well as writers and activists Derrick Bell and Kwame Turé—all nationally-known authorities on African-American Studies.

Planned in the near future are an ecumenical conference in Thurman’s honor, focusing on the spiritual roots of social change; an African-American inter-faith conference to address biases and misunderstandings between Blacks, Jews and Muslims; a Black women’s conference for leaders; two education conferences for pastors from churches with black and white congregation, focusing on ways to reverse racism and exploring on the role of the African-American church in reshaping the social agenda of the community; and a concert series featuring Black artists. But in explaining his plans for such high profile visitors and events, Jefferson Rogers quickly notes that the goal is not show but substance and action—the preparation of a radical foundation in “authentic teaching.” “The Thurman Program academically can become one of such quality that it would, in my very private and biased opinion, supersede the DuBois Center at Harvard University. We must build, not on sensationalism, but on a substantial institutional approach to social and spiritual truth.”¹² And in laying the foundation for this type of authentic, intercultural education, Rogers believes the Black Church must play a leading role: “The Black church is a very conservative institution, intellectually conservative and culturally rich. What Martin Luther King, Jr. was able to do was to trigger cultural therapy through the Black church. The Civil Rights Movement educated the community in a way it had not been before. It is the best instrument that African Americans have—renewal must come through the Black church.”¹³

Notes

¹Thurman describes this encounter in *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1979), 132.

²*Ibid.*, 116.

³*Ibid.*, 132. Thurman describes this encounter in pages 130-136.

⁴"Twelve Great American Preachers," *Life* vol. 34, no. 14 (April 6, 1953), 126.

⁵Thurman, 169.

⁶*Ibid.*, 181.

⁷Walter Meulder, cited in Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 19.

⁸*Southern Humanities Conference*, Jackson, Mississippi (February 16-18, 1995).

⁹Jefferson Rogers, "Prologue to the Howard Thurman Program." Presented to Stetson University's Committee on Diversity, October 23, 1996.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Personal Interview with Reverend Jefferson Rogers, (October 1996).

¹³*Ibid.*

Stephanie Athey is assistant professor of English at Stetson University and a research associate at The Trotter Institute. She has published essays on colonial discourse in the Americas, and the racial dynamics of feminist theory and practice, including the contemporary politics of reproductive health, race and technology.