
MORAL STRUGGLE AND THE PROPHETS

Howard Thurman

Edited by

Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker



ORBIS BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York

INTRODUCTION

I

IN 1926 HOWARD THURMAN, fresh out of Rochester Theological Seminary, started his ministerial career at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, a black Baptist church in Oberlin, Ohio. As a new minister conversant with the latest scholarship, he was, by his own admission, somewhat overly confident. “Initially, the temptation was to try to educate and re-educate my congregation in the light of my own learning.” This, he soon found out, sometimes “offended their sensibilities.” So he began to find other ways to preach, looking for an approach that both respected the perspective of his congregants and combined his need to instruct with the knowledge that others now looked to him for “support, strength, and for guidance.”¹

He found that “the most creative method was a sermon series,” a group of sermons organized around a common theme. His first sermon series was on the topic “knowledge-understanding casteth out fear.”² These sermons, on medical quackery and fakery, retained a didactic edge, and some of the members of his congregation were upset that Thurman had called out some of their favorite patent medicines. But it also represented some of his lifelong concerns: the relation between the physical body and one’s sense of identity, and the pursuit of truth, sometimes difficult and hard-won truths, as the best method of combatting fear. Probably with this sermon series in mind, he wrote in 1927 that he had “a growing conviction that we are fed and clothed by a vast system built upon deceit and adulteration.” If this included lies about worthless medical nostrums, his indictment was far broader. He hoped to help inspire “a grand swell of

1. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* [hereafter WHAH] (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 65–67.

2. *Ibid.*, 65–67.

spiritual energy” that would lead to a “genuine uprooting” of “existing systems.”³ Throughout his long career, the sermon series would remain Thurman’s favorite method of preaching, and he delivered sermon series on a vast variety of topics, from the 1920s through the 1970s, always encouraging individuals to find, within their own resources, their own “grand swell of spiritual energy.”

Howard Thurman was born in Florida in November 1899. He was raised in Daytona, Florida, primarily by his mother and grandmother, in a poor family with few resources. He came of age as the legal segregation of Jim Crow was tightening its hold on black Southerners, trying to strip them of their dignity and ambitions. Thurman, from an early age, in his own quiet way, refused its grasp. As his lifelong friend Benjamin Mays remarked, he was “free.” “He generated in the minds of young Negroes the idea of freedom. When they saw Howard Thurman, most of them, for the first time, saw a free man. When they heard or read Howard Thurman, for the first time they experienced a free man and this freedom was contagious.”⁴ By dint of his native intelligence, determination, and ability to circumvent a system that was established to thwart black Floridians like himself, he managed to obtain a high school education, though he had to leave Daytona to do so, attending high school in Jacksonville and St. Augustine. He graduated as valedictorian and was awarded a scholarship to Morehouse College in Atlanta, and became one of a tiny percentage—much less than one percent—of black Southerners able to attend a four-year college. At Morehouse he once again thrived and once again was valedictorian, becoming, as his classmates wrote, “the personification of the Morehouse ideal.”⁵

Thurman grew up an introspective loner, an instinctive mystic from an early age, who connected to the divine primarily through nature, through trees, through the disruptive majesty of hurricanes, and through

3. To Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, 20 September 1927, in Walter Earl Fluker, ed., *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman* [hereafter PHWT] (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 1:117–18.

4. Ricardo A. Millet, ed., *Simmering on the Calm Presence and Profound Wisdom of Howard Thurman (A Special Edition of Debate and Understanding—A Journal for the Study of Minority Americans’ Economic, Political, Social, and Religious Development)* (Spring 1982), 86–88.

5. Morehouse College Yearbook, in PHWT 1:25–29.

the merging of sand, sea, and sky on Daytona Beach. His relation to organized Christianity was complicated, but he soon became a diligent churchgoer at his local black Baptist church; and by the time he was a teenager, he knew he wanted to pursue a religious vocation. After graduating from Morehouse, despite offers to go elsewhere (such as studying economics at the University of Chicago), he opted to go to Rochester Theological Seminary in upstate New York, where Thurman was trained in the tenets of a modernist Christianity that rejected fundamentalism and was deeply committed to the principles of the social gospel.⁶ After a stint teaching at Oberlin, in 1928 he accepted a position as a professor of religion at Morehouse and its sister school, Spelman College. In 1929 he spent a semester studying at Haverford College with the renowned scholar of mysticism, Rufus Jones, which gave an intellectual structure to his already pronounced mystical inclination. He had married Katie Kelley in 1926; and from their short union, they had a daughter, Olive, two years later. But Katie's health was not good, and she died of tuberculosis in 1930. In 1932 he married Sue Bailey. They also had a daughter, Anne Spencer, the following year, and Thurman and Sue Bailey Thurman formed a creative partnership that would endure until Howard's passing.

By the early 1930s Howard Thurman was one of the most prominent young ministers in America, much sought after to speak before both white and black audiences. In 1932 he reconnected with his former mentor, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, now president of Howard University, who brought Thurman to the Howard campus as professor of religion and university chaplain (within a few years the title was enhanced to dean of chapel). In 1935–36, he was chair of a four-person “Negro Delegation” that went on a “Pilgrimage of Friendship” from the American Student Christian Federation to British India. (Sue Bailey Thurman was one of the four delegates.) The tour was a great success, and Thurman tried to present a new image of black Christianity to the Indian public, one that rejected missionary outreach and instead tried to connect to Indians through their shared heritage as people of color challenging white hegemony. The highlight of the journey was a meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, the first

6. See PHWT 1:liii–lxii; also Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 24–95.

encounter between the world-famous leader of the Indian independence movement and African Americans.

Thurman had been a pacifist since his undergraduate days at Morehouse. His meeting with Gandhi inspired him to further develop his own version of radical nonviolence, which he discussed in sermons and lectures and with his Howard University students. Although he was never a front-line activist—he preferred to offer advice and spiritual counsel from behind the scenes—he inspired many future leaders of the civil rights movement, among them James Farmer, Pauli Murray, and Martin Luther King Jr. He also was an influential proponent of the spirituality of personal exploration and helped shape a new liberal American religiosity, increasingly untethered from the traditional Christianity of creeds and denominations.

In 1944 Thurman left his comfortable position at Howard to become co-pastor of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, one of the first churches in the United States organized on an interracial and interdenominational basis. After 1946 he was the church's chief minister, and this position brought him new national attention. In the fall of 1953 he left Fellowship Church to become professor of spiritual disciplines and resources at the Boston University School of Theology and dean of Marsh Chapel, the first African American to hold such a position at a mainstream, white university. (He was actually Boston University's first tenured African American professor.) His years at Boston University were challenging—he developed innovative courses on spiritual disciplines and resources—and also somewhat frustrating, as he failed to realize his ambition to create a version of Fellowship Church on the Boston University campus. He left his teaching position at Boston University in 1962 to embark on several years of what he called his “wider ministry,” which included a semester teaching at Ibadan University in Nigeria, his only extended stay in Africa. He formally retired from Boston University in 1965.

After his retirement Howard and Sue returned to San Francisco. This did not lead to any slackening of his pace as a guest preacher, lecturer, and teacher, which he continued until almost his final days. He took an active role in leading the Howard Thurman Educational Trust, assisting students at historically black colleges and universities, holding seminars with

black seminarians, and publicizing and disseminating his body of work. He continued to write, publishing in 1971 the culminating statement of his religious and social philosophy, *The Search for Common Ground*.

He was proud of the achievements of the civil rights movement, dismayed at what he perceived as the turn to racial separation in the Black Power movement, and shocked at the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Nonetheless, he continued to find “common ground” with many of the leaders of the new turn to black consciousness, among them Jesse Jackson, Lerone Bennett Jr., Derrick Bell, and Vincent Harding. Although his achievements never received the recognition they deserved, by the mid-1970s he was beginning to receive more attention, with well-publicized interviews on national television networks and the emergence of a coterie of scholars dedicated to studying and analyzing his contributions to religion and American social thought. Thurman published his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, in 1979. After a long illness, he died in April 1981.

II

Howard Thurman always thought that his most effective medium was the spoken, rather than the written, word. His style was distinctive; slow, with thoughtful pauses and gatherings of thought, offering a glimpse of his carefully examined inner life with a hope that his audience would take the opportunity to explore their own interiority. Although he wrote articles fairly frequently, it would not be until 1944 that he would publish his first book. Twenty more followed, though he remained primarily known as a preacher, not a writer. Because he almost always preached extemporaneously, few manuscripts of his early sermons survive, and there are few early examples of his sermon series. The oldest extant sermon series of Thurman’s are five sermons, “The Message of the Spirituals,” that he preached at Spelman College in Atlanta in the fall of 1928, the first surviving fruits of what would be a lifelong concern with the religious meanings of the Negro spiritual.⁷

In 1937 six sermons he delivered in Ontario, largely delivered from prepared texts on “The Significance of Jesus,” are an important state-

7. “The Message of the Spirituals,” in PHWT 1:126–39.

ment of his ideas about radical nonviolence.⁸ A sermon series on a similar theme, “A Vision of God and Human Nature,” also delivered in Canada, survives from 1939.⁹ These sermon series survive because someone at the sponsoring institution transcribed Thurman’s words. “Mysticism and Social Change,” more a lecture series than a sermon series, and probably delivered from a prepared text, also survives from that year.¹⁰ What all of these efforts at sermon series share is that their circulation was extremely limited, and they were never reprinted by Thurman.

The new technology of magnetic tape recording, developed in Germany during the war, became available commercially in the United States in the late 1940s. Thurman was an early adopter. No longer would his sermons vanish into the ether or require the efforts of a trained stenographer to capture his words as he spoke them. By 1948 he was recording many of his sermons at Fellowship Church. When he agreed to come to Boston in 1953 one of his conditions was the availability of a good tape-recording system. Some of the transcribed sermons were circulated by Thurman. In 1956 he published a volume of sermons, *The Growing Edge*, consisting of “transcriptions from the tape recorder and carefully edited.”¹¹ Thurman amassed a library of over eight hundred recorded sermons. In the 1970s the Howard Thurman Education Trust made an effort to transcribe many, but by no means all, of Thurman’s sermons, and some of them were made available on cassette tapes.

The editors of Thurman’s papers, *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*, were faced with a dilemma and an embarrassment of riches, particularly for the period after 1948. (The editors of the current volume were also editors of the documentary edition; Walter Earl Fluker was the senior editor and Peter Eisenstadt was the associate editor.) There was far too much good material to include in the five volumes of the Thurman Papers, and the reluctant decision was reached to omit the sermon series and arrange for publication at a later date.

From the late 1940s through the late 1970s Thurman recorded over twenty sermon series, comprising almost three hundred sermons. Once

8. “The Significance of Jesus,” in PHWT 2:44–92.

9. “A Vision of God and Human Nature,” in PHWT 2:222–35.

10. “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2:190–222.

11. HT, *The Growing Edge* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), ix.

again, the editors have been obliged to be selective, and are publishing, in four volumes, the best of Howard Thurman's sermon series. In choosing the sermon series for this volume we have tried to demonstrate the breadth of Thurman's interests. We have also tried to select sermon series that cover topics not treated in depth elsewhere in his published writings.

Thurman's sermon series cover a wide variety of subjects. Some are fairly specific, such as "The Message of the Prophets," published in this volume, comprising ten sermons on specific Hebrew prophets. Some have broader rubrics, such as "The Quest for Maturity" and "Seeking and Finding," both to be published in a future volume. The number of sermons in a sermon series ranges from three to thirteen. Thurman generally delivered his sermon series on consecutive Sundays, or as near to this as his busy schedule permitted. Although the editors are publishing some material from Thurman's retirement years after 1965, the bulk of the published sermons are from his years at Fellowship Church and Boston University. Thurman sometimes repeated sermon series to his different audiences in San Francisco and Boston. He often reprised the same topic in entirely different sermon series. (In the series we are publishing in these volumes, there are four different sermons on Second Isaiah.) Since he spoke extemporaneously, all of these versions have significant differences. In these cases of a duplicated topic, the editors have chosen what they feel to be the most illustrative among the alternative versions. Although the editors have tried to publish complete sermon series, in some instances they made a decision to omit a sermon from a series. In some cases, the editors are publishing related material not formally included in a sermon series.

Although Thurman was not a religious thinker who underwent great shifts in his basic views, he certainly was influenced by the context of his times, which, for the sermon series, meant basically 1949 to 1962, years of the Cold War, domestic anticommunism, and the most optimistic years of the civil rights movement. Thurman tended to avoid direct political or racial commentary in his sermons, and this was particularly so when, as at Fellowship Church and Boston University, he was aware that he was speaking to a racially mixed audience and did not wish to divide them along racial lines. (When speaking to black audiences, particularly in the years after 1965, he was sometimes a bit franker.) Nonetheless, the underlying political motivations of many of these sermons are not hidden

and would have been clear to his audience. Finally, these are sermons of a congregational minister, speaking to his regular congregation. Like all successful ministers and lecturers, Thurman had favorite sermons that he preached, with some variation, numerous times. When preaching to his own congregation, he needed new material, and the sermon series are a reflection of this. If the sermons convey his need to instruct and inspire, there is also a friendly, almost bantering familiarity with his audience, a desire to include his congregation as equals in his thoughts and ideas.

In this, the first of four volumes, the editors are printing two sermon series, “Man and the Moral Struggle” and “The Message of the Prophets.” For Thurman, there is a moral struggle when “the end that a man seeks involves him in reaching for that which is outside of or which transcends his personal private ends.” When this involved a search for ends “that are transcendent and boundless, it involves me in the kind of struggle in which there is at stake the ultimate destiny of my life.” The sermons in “Man and the Moral Struggle” are sketches of individuals involved in this sort of life-transforming moral struggle. Some of these are sketches of religious figures, such as Jesus and Paul, while others are of literary characters, such as Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, or Goethe’s Faust. Thurman delivered two sermon series on “Man and the Moral Struggle,” one at Fellowship Church in 1949, the latter at Boston University in 1954–1955. The current version is a composite of both series. In cases of duplication of topics the editors have chosen the version that best fits the purposes of this volume. We have added another sermon on a literary topic, from the same time period, on Thornton Wilder’s *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Although it is a separate sermon series, “The Message of the Prophets” exemplifies what Thurman meant by “moral struggle”: personal and social transformation through the seeking of transcendent ends. Although the theology of Thurman and that of the prophets was quite different, the Hebrew prophets were always of central importance to Thurman’s view of religion. Thurman felt their social witness, their closeness to God, and their insistence that holiness is not only a personal quality, but that entire peoples and nations can, and must, be holy, and that it is the job of prophets to call a nation to holiness, whatever the reception they might receive or, if their message is unwelcome, the maltreatment they must endure. The editors have supplemented “The Message of the Prophets” with a

published commentary on Zephaniah that, for reasons of space, they were unable to include in *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*.

In 1980, toward the end of Thurman's life, he told an interviewer that he was "convinced of the unity of life, and that in living my life I am making a single statement even though I live it in terms of particular moments, incidents. So that if today I had a motion picture reel that had recorded the story of my life from my birth up to this present moment, and if I unwound it backward, I would see that every single moment, every single step was an unfolding of the same basic, fundamental idiom."¹² These sermons are a collection of "motion picture reels" of other lives—some familiar, some quite obscure, some existing solely in works of literature—that Thurman wished others to watch with him.

In the end it is our hope that those who read these sermons will, like Thurman, see *Walking with God* as an apt metaphor for the ways in which spirituality and social transformation are conjoined, so that the walk with God is at the same time a walk in the world of nature, people, and systems that create contexts for engagement and renewal, and that their respective pilgrimages are not confined to a narrow and myopic vision of the church or to Christianity for that matter. Thurman believed that the transformative power that is discovered in one's inner life must of necessity be worked out in the political and social dimensions, as well as in a search for "a friendly world under friendly skies."¹³

12. "Interview on Religion and Aging" [May 1980], in PHWT 5:307.

13. Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 308.