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# THE WAY OF THE MYSTICS

*Howard Thurman*

*Edited by*

Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker



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## INTRODUCTION

Mysticism is one of the truest forms of human thought. It is religion in its most concrete and exclusive form. It is finding a way to God. I say finding *a* way to God and not *the* way to God. . . . [The mystic] reduce[s] all of the multiple and conflicting elements of reality to one continuous whole. In his moment of illumination, the mystic realizes this unity. It is in this experience that he is principally convinced that the *real* experience is one of unity rather than disunity. (“The Mystic Way,” ca. 1938)

The mystic rests his case upon the primary contactual<sup>1</sup> experience of God. It is first hand. He considers himself as standing within the experience itself. (“Mysticism and Social Change,” February 1939)

[Mysticism is] the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own soul. Such a response is total, affecting the inner quality of the life and its outward manifestations. (“Mysticism and Social Change,” 1959)

If there is one point of agreement in discussions of Howard Thurman’s distinctive understanding of religion, during his lifetime and subsequently, it is that he was a mystic. As early as 1932, Thurman was being described in the Black press as “the Negro mystic,” or reporting on “Reverend Thurman in one of his characteristic mystical attitudes.”<sup>2</sup> In 1942 the

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1. Of or relating to contact.

2. Richard H. Bowling, “The Guide Post,” *New Journal and Guide* [Norfolk, VA]; Lucius L. Jones Jr., “A Version of the Thurman-Bailey Nuptials,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 15 June 1932.

*Pittsburgh Courier* hailed Thurman as “one of America’s great mystics.”<sup>3</sup> Similar encomia continued throughout his life for this “mystic, scholar, poet and author,” or “clergyman, educator, [and] mystic.”<sup>4</sup> The secondary literature on Thurman has volumes titled “the mystic as prophet,” or on his “philosophical mysticism.”<sup>5</sup> There are substantial accounts about Thurman in books such as *American Mysticism: From William James to Zen*.<sup>6</sup>

Howard Thurman was a mystic, but unlike many mystics he spoke very little about his own mystical experiences and was far more comfortable speaking and writing about mysticism in general, or, as in this volume, exploring his personal canon of great mystics. He encouraged spiritual exploration, without the expectation that those in his hearing would become mystics. He was always conscious of the likelihood that his discussions of mysticism would be misunderstood. He opened his first published writing on mysticism, from 1934, with the following disclaimer: “Perhaps there is no word in our language that has been as completely misunderstood and as freely interpreted by unintelligent sincerity as ‘mysticism.’” As he noted, everyone from Harry Houdini to Mahatma Gandhi had been labeled as a mystic.<sup>7</sup> Despite his best efforts, he knew that many saw mysticism pejoratively, as something airy and abstruse, impractical and metaphysical. Lester Granger, the executive secretary of the National Urban League in 1941, offered the barbed compliment that while Thurman’s talks “frequently smack of mysticism . . . every now and then he throws his mysticism away and delivers his audience a real sock on

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3. Peter Dana, “Dr. Thurman Speaks on Indian Question,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 29 August 1942.

4. “Elect Howard Thurman to American Academy,” *Chicago Defender*, 13 June 1959; J. Y. Smith, “Howard Thurman, Clergyman, Educator, Mystic Dies,” *Washington Post*, 16 April 1981.

5. Luther E. Smith *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1981); Anthony Sean Neal, *Howard Thurman’s Philosophical Mysticism: Love against Fragmentation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019).

6. Hal Bridges, *American Mysticism: From William James to Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 51–60.

7. HT, “Review of Mary Anita Ewer, *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism*,” *Journal of Religion* 14 (October 1934): 383–84. Ewer’s book would long be one of Thurman’s favorite texts on mysticism.

its intellectual solar plexus.”<sup>8</sup> Thurman’s writings attempt to rescue mysticism from this sort of condescension and derision. He frequently used the title “Mysticism and Social Change” or some near variant to demonstrate that what seemed oxymoronic to scoffers like Granger was nothing of the sort. There was a mysticism that sought to change the world rather than retreat from it.<sup>9</sup>

Thurman was a mystic long before he acquired an adequate vocabulary to describe it. He once told an interviewer that “when I was born God must have put a live coal in my heart, for I was his man and there was no escape.”<sup>10</sup> But his religion was personal and unconventional, seeking God out of church, out of doors, in a world with ghosts, angels, and pervaded by the divine presence.<sup>11</sup> It began at the moment of his birth, when he was born with a caul, with the amniotic sac covering his face, behind the veil, a rare occurrence that his mother and grandmother thought conveyed the gift of second sight, of clairvoyance. However, they believed second sight was a supremely unlucky gift, bringing only misfortune to its possessors; and so, to ward it off, they pierced his ears. But it didn’t entirely work. “How deeply I was influenced by this ‘superstition’ I do not know,” he wrote in his autobiography, adding that he had always believed that he had, in some measure, retained the ability of “second sight.”<sup>12</sup> There were other childhood “superstitions.” He sought in nature, out of doors, out of

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8. Lester Granger to Virgil Louder, 23 December 1941, in Folder 6, Box 28, HTC.

9. For Thurman’s writings on socially involved mysticism, see “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2: 190–222 (February 1939); “Mysticism and Social Change” (public lecture, Berkeley, CA, 1959), in Folder 5, Box 8, HTC; “Mysticism and Social Action,” in *Lawrence Lectures on Religion and Society* (Berkeley, CA: First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, 1978); “Mysticism and Social Change” (fifteen lectures, Pacific School of Religion, July 1978), in Folders 37–38, Box 8, HTC; “Mysticism and Social Action,” *AME Zion Quarterly Review* 92, no. 2 (October 1980): 2–13.

10. Jean Burden, “Meditation on Howard Thurman on the Occasion of His Memorial Service April 10, 1981,” in Howard Thurman Paper Project Files, Boston University.

11. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” Lecture 5: [God as Presence] (12 July 1978), printed in the current volume. See also HT, “Religious Commitment” (ca. 1978), in Folder 25, Box 4, HTC; HT, “The Binding Commitment,” in Folder 24, Box 4, HTC.

12. WHAH 263; See also Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Bollingen Series 76; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 16; and

church, a unity that he could not find among humans. As he wrote in *The Search for Common Ground*, from his earliest years “a tendency—even more, an inner demand—for ‘whole-making,’ a feel for a completion in and of things, for inclusive consummation.”<sup>13</sup> The lessons of his elders, especially those his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, imparted to him a haunted and enchanted world, of threats and rewards, of hidden linkages between apparently unconnected events. Hers was a syncretistic Afro-Christian worldview, though he nowhere discusses the likely sources of his grandmother’s spirit lore.

Thurman looked for other explanations for his spiritual inclinations. He became, like his grandmother and mother, a dutiful churchgoer, and he flourished in the world of Black Baptists; but a gap remained between his Christian beliefs and his out-of-doors mysticism. Of his time as an undergraduate at Morehouse College (1919–1923), one of his instructors, his lifelong friend Benjamin Mays, would write, “I believe that he showed signs then of possessing more mysticism in his religion than the average person, so much so that I am inclined to think that he was considered queer by some of the students and professors.”<sup>14</sup> During his three years at Rochester Theological Seminary (RTS; 1923–1926) he was taught little or nothing about mysticism from his instructors. However, he did learn from RTS that “all dogma, all theology—however wonderful they may be—are always a little out of date, because they are rationalizations—using that word in the best sense of the word—they are rationalizations of religious experience,” not the dynamic, fluid experience of the divine that was part of his own personal life.<sup>15</sup>

Thurman’s understanding of his own mysticism was greatly deepened by two encounters in the 1920s. In 1925 he discovered the work of the South African novelist, pacifist, and feminist, Olive Schreiner (1855–1920). Schreiner was a bold religious thinker, largely post-Christian. “I did not identify as being mystical,” Thurman said in 1978; despite

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Clarence E. Hardy III, “Imagine a World: Howard Thurman, Spiritual Perception, and American Calvinism,” *Journal of Religion* 81, no. 1 (January 2001): 78–97.

13. HT, *The Search for Common Ground* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 76.

14. Benjamin E. Mays to Mary Jenness, 12 February 1936, in PWHT 1: 323–25.

15. Roberta Byrd Barr, “A Creative Encounter: Interview with Howard Thurman, Part 1 (14–15 February 1969),” in Folder 30, Box 16, HTC.

“certain experiences which were a part of my life since I was a little boy until I began studying the life and the works of Olive Schreiner.”<sup>16</sup> Like Thurman, Schreiner was at her core a nature mystic, and after reading her, he would write, “it became possible for me to move from primary experience, to conceptualizing that experience, to a vision inclusive of all of life.”<sup>17</sup> The second encounter, both personal and intellectual, was the semester he spent in 1929 with the American scholar of mysticism, Rufus Jones at Haverford College. From Jones he learned the vocabulary and the history of mysticism that would guide his thinking for the remainder of his life. This is discussed at greater length in Thurman’s lecture, printed in the current volume, on his study with Jones.<sup>18</sup>

After his semester with Jones, Thurman began to preach about mysticism and taught courses on mysticism at Howard University and was increasingly identified as a mystic by journalists and others. Thurman’s first substantial published discussion of mysticism was four lectures he delivered in 1939 at Eden Seminary near St. Louis on the topic of “Mysticism and Social Change.”<sup>19</sup> (Although they were printed in the seminary bulletin, they were not widely circulated, and Thurman himself either never knew, or forgot, about their publication until their rediscovery in the 1970s.) Thurman would write about mysticism in numerous sermons, lectures, and meditations, and he made mysticism the subject of three books, *The Creative Encounter* (1953), *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (1961)—first delivered as the Rufus Jones Memorial Lecture—and *Disciplines of the Spirit* (1962).<sup>20</sup>

This book prints some of Thurman’s most significant unpublished sermons on mysticism. At its centerpiece are two sermon series he gave at Fellowship Church in 1950, and again in 1953, with the same title and many of the same overlapping subjects, “Men Who Have Walked

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16. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change: Lecture 1,” (5 July 1978).

17. HT, ed., *A Track to the Water’s Edge: The Olive Schreiner Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), xxviii.

18. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change: Lecture 12: [Rufus Jones]” (25 July 1987), printed in the current volume.

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

20. *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and Social Witness* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954); *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961); *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

with God.” These were sermons on some of his favorite mystics, on his personal canon of the mystical tradition. (The subjects were largely, but not entirely male.) They range chronologically from the Buddha to Thurman’s twentieth-century contemporaries. From the two sermon series the editors are publishing thirteen sermons. This is supplemented by several other writings on mysticism: a 1950 sermon “The Religion of the Inner Life,” and two lectures from a course he taught in 1978 at the Pacific School of Religion on “Mysticism and Social Change.”

Thurman recognized a wide variety of different types of mysticism but patterned his broader explanations of mysticism on his own experiences. In 1939 he wrote that he did not claim “to have scaled the heights of rarefied illumination so vivid to the mystic in his moments of clarity, but I have lived for a long time in the stream of the mystic’s experience.”<sup>21</sup> Thurman, drawing from Rufus Jones and other students of mysticism such as Mary Anita Ewer and Evelyn Underhill, came to see mysticism as a distinct kind and category of religion, and that all mystics, in their experience of God, shared something profoundly alike, transcending their outward creedal affiliations.<sup>22</sup>

Because he probably thought words superfluous and did not want his vision of mysticism to occlude anyone else’s path, he rarely described his own mystical experiences in any detail, preferring to help others “center down” and find their own paths of God. One exception is this poetic account of a hilltop epiphany from 1939. As often was the case with Thurman, a response to nature inspired his deepest spiritual impulses:

I journeyed to a hill top at close of day  
 Darkness stole upon the valley beneath as sleep on a tired brow  
 Silence pursued me all the day  
 Won at last—  
 Exhausted I lay at his feet . . . [ellipsis in original]  
 No sense of senses, time—space all  
 Awareness of self spread out till I and all  
 Around me run together

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21. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2: 191.

22. For Underhill, see HT, “Mysticism and Social Change: Lecture 14,” 27 July 1978.

In one expansive, streaming, liquid quiet.  
 Suddenly with a start—time began  
 The heavy cares of the years seemed lighter now—  
 God so near  
 I was radiant  
 With holy light.<sup>23</sup>

In a 1959 lecture, Thurman described four types of mysticism. There were mystics who “stand in a relationship of personal response to a God they conceive in more or less personal terms,” common in Catholic, Protestant, and Hindu mysticism. This included mystics whose experience of God focused on Jesus, labeled by Thurman as “Christ mystics.”<sup>24</sup> There were mystics who respond to “an infinite more or less intellectually conceived, and the attitude of response defined in one of contemplation.” In this group he placed mystic traditions such as Daoism, Neo-Platonism, and the Kabala. The third group were practitioners of the “mysticism of the Light Within.” Thurman characterized these mystics “as having a trustful attitude towards inner experience. It is their insight that they touch a divinely formed point of contact with God within the Soul.” The fourth category was the “mysticism of occult science,” various methods of obtaining psychic insight into matters otherwise hidden.<sup>25</sup> Although Thurman had a surprisingly avid interest in occultism, in precognition, synchronicity, in faith healers, and in seers such as Edgar Cayce—an interest he largely kept out of his talks on mysticism—he was preeminently a mystic of the Light Within.<sup>26</sup>

Thurman’s mysticism of the Light Within was patterned on the practices of the Quakers, something he was first exposed to when he studied with Rufus Jones. Jones also introduced him to the mystic that Thurman

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23. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2: 201–2.

24. See the lecture on St. Augustine, printed in the current volume.

25. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change” (1959), Folder 5, Box 8, HTC.

26. For Thurman’s interest in Rosicrucianism, see Thurman to Rev. J. E. Dunn, 11 March 1937, in Folder 16, Box 24, HTC. For his interest in Edgar Cayce, see Walter N. Panhke to Thurman, in PHWT 4: 193–97. For his meeting with faith-healer Harrie Vernetta Rhodes, see “Mysticism: Lecture 6” (April 1973), in Folder 37, Box 8, HTC; and Marguerite Harmon Bro, *In the One Spirit: The Autobiography of Harrie Vernetta Rhodes, as Told to Marguerite Vernetta Rhodes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951).



always thought best exemplified this tradition, the thirteenth-century German Dominican priest Meister Eckhart, who taught that “there is an ‘uncreated element’ in the soul of man that is the God within,” and much of Thurman’s mysticism was developing and explaining spiritual techniques to find this inner God, such as silences, detachment, and meditation, which he discussed in his book *Disciplines of the Spirit* and elsewhere. Eckhart’s influence on Thurman is discussed at greater length in the sermon on Eckhart printed in the current volume. A consequence of Thurman’s emphasis on the Light Within meant that for him “the mystic experiences unity” with God, he wrote in 1939, but “not identity,” a unity with God that enhances, rather than dissolves, the mystic’s personality and presence.<sup>27</sup>

This was a mysticism active in the world. To use a distinction of Rufus Jones that Thurman made his own, it was a mysticism of affirmation rather than negation, which he understood as “working out in a social frame of reference the realism of their mystic experience.”<sup>28</sup> Thurman gave numerous lectures on the subject of mysticism and social change or social action. But he always made clear that mysticism and social change were distinct, though ultimately inseparable. Douglas Steere, who first met Thurman at the time of his study with Rufus Jones at Haverford College, later a prominent Quaker theologian and writer on mysticism, wrote in a tribute to Thurman in 1975 that Eckhart’s lesson that “you can only spend in good works what you have earned in contemplation” must have lodged deeply in “Howard’s mind and spirit for it has been a theme song of his ever since.”<sup>29</sup> He opened his 1939 lecture series “Mysticism and Social Change” stating that because “it has been necessary for me to participate both passively and actively in what is known as the social struggle,” his was a mysticism that had practical, political consequences.<sup>30</sup> The mystic is “under obligation to achieve the good which in some profound sense is given in the moment of vision.”<sup>31</sup> In affirmation mysticism, for

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27. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2: 208.

28. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2: 213.

29. Douglas V. Steere, “Don’t Forget Those Leather Gloves,” in *Essays in Honor of Howard Thurman on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday, November 18, 1975* (ed. Samuel Lucius Gandy; Washington, DC: Hoffman, 1976), iii.

30. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2: 191.

31. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2: 214.

Thurman, “the distinction between personal and social religion” becomes “artificial and unrealistic.”<sup>32</sup> The affirmation mystic’s vision of the good is connected to the social struggle, not primarily “because of any particular political or social theory” or because of “humanitarianism or humanism.” Rather, the mystic is “interested in social action because society as he knows it ensnares the human spirit in a maze of particulars so that the One cannot be sensed nor the good realized.”<sup>33</sup> Rufus Jones was one of two mystics profiled in “Men Who Have Walked with God” that Thurman had actually met. The other was the model for socially involved mysticism, Mahatma Gandhi.

If Thurman’s was a mysticism of the Light Within, it was also a mysticism of the boundlessness and connectedness of nature and human community. In 1944, probably for the first time, he offered what would become a signature aphorism, a mystic tautology, the “utterly astounding fact” that “life is alive.” Life, Thurman further explained, is “even more alive than any particular manifestation of life.” Life pervaded everything, even apparently inert objects like rocks and stones. If this was an insight of Olive Schreiner, it was something he knew intuitively before he read her work. In 1978 he told the journalist and historian Lerone Bennett Jr. that “ever since I can remember I have felt that there is no binding or absolute separation between the segment of life that is Howard Thurman and life.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, he speculated, it might be possible to get beyond “the wall, barrier, or context” that separates one form of life, one species, from another, perhaps by means that were currently unacknowledged by contemporary science.<sup>35</sup> What this meant for Thurman was, as he wrote in 1944, if “the cosmos is the kind of order that sustains and supports life and its potentials,” then it “sustains and supports the demands that the relationships between men and between man and God be one of harmony, integration, wholeness, all that we mean by love.” If “life is alive,” then life

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32. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2: 214

33. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” in PHWT 2: 216.

34. Lerone Bennett Jr., “Howard Thurman: 20th Century Holy Man,” *Ebony* 33, no. 4 (February 1978): 85

35. HT, *The Search for Common Ground*, 67.

is indivisible. Segregation and artificial separation between people and peoples equaled death.<sup>36</sup> This was Thurman's deepest mystical vision.

There is a story Howard Thurman liked to tell about Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), the distinguished American theologian. During the 1930s and early 1940s the two men were quite close, and Niebuhr was a frequent guest preacher at Howard University, where Thurman was dean of chapel. On one occasion, they talked into the wee hours, having a “typical no-holds-barred discussion about religion and our society and the rest of it.” When Niebuhr taught his next class at Union Theological Seminary he talked about his discussion. There was one Black student in the class. After the class he came up to Niebuhr and said: “I’m glad you mentioned that man. He is the great betrayer of us all. When this Thurman fellow came up out of Florida and began to talk around, many of us who were much younger were sure that at last someone had come who would be our Moses. And what did he do? He turned mystic on us!” At this point in telling the story, Thurman would laugh heartily.<sup>37</sup> Thurman liked being the butt of his own stories, but for Thurman, mysticism, at its highest, unites one’s public and private self in a shattering moment of transforming clarity.<sup>38</sup> Like Moses at the burning bush, finding his God, and finding his life’s mission, to free his people from their bondage.

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36. HT, “The Cosmic Guarantee in the Judeo-Christian Message” (June 1944), in Folder 11, Box 7, HTC; reworked as “Judgment and Hope in the Christian Message,” published in 1948, and reprinted in PHWT 2: 242–47.

37. Albert J. Raboteau, “In Search of Common Ground: Howard Thurman and Religious Community,” in *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self* (ed. Richard Madsen et al.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 157. For another version of the anecdote, see HT, “Mysticism and Social Action,” 26.

38. See extended discussion of the public and private spheres of Thurman’s mystical thought in Walter Earl Fluker, “Leaders Who Have Shaped U.S. Religious Dialogue,” in *Howard Thurman: Intercultural and Interreligious Leader*, volume 2 of *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook* (ed. Sharon Henderson Callahan; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013), 571–78.