

## ***Toward Understanding a Black Spiritual Left: the Spirituality of Howard Thurman and the Black Lives Matter Movement***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Careful readers of the theologian, mystic, and minister, Howard Thurman, have noted that his work grappled with the major social issues of his day—namely racism, sexism, economic inequality, and other forms of oppression. Indeed, in works such as *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), *Luminous Darkness* (1965), and *Deep River and The Negro Speaks of Life and Death* (1975), Thurman pushed readers to engage oppression—particularly racial oppression—as an issue that people of faith needed to engage. Though Thurman's more popular book-length works have gained attention from religious scholars, his essays "Mysticism and Social Change" (1939)—found in Volume two of the *Howard Thurman Papers*—and "Mysticism and the Experience of Love" (1961) expose how Thurman's mysticism could be used as a tool in the fight against oppression.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many religious scholars have attempted to push the bounds of the study of black religion finding its political and spiritual strivings beyond black churches.<sup>1</sup> I assert that such places were found and created by, what I call, the Black spiritual left. In this paper I define the Black Spiritual Left, as well as its characteristics and politics. I hold that Black Spiritual Leftist figures can be found as early as the nineteenth century and are still found today within the current political milieu. Later, I shine a spotlight on Howard Thurman and the Black Lives Matter Movement, unveiling them as grand examples of Black Spiritual Leftism.

My understanding of American leftist spirituality primarily follows Leigh Schmidt's portrait in *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. Here, using the words of Walt Whitman, Schmidt describes American spiritual seekers, who sought a world beyond "the 'corpses' of institutions, traditions, and forms. . . [towards], 'the divine ideas of spirituality'. . . [Where] 'All religions,' including Christianity, were but temporary journeys."<sup>2</sup> Schmidt gives close attention to the American spiritual left's various streams, such as transcendentalists, pragmatist, Haverford Quakers mystics, and even the Buddhist basketball coach Phil Jackson. Within the narrative Schmidt also gives short, but important mentions of blacks he views as examples of the American spiritual left. These figures include W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Howard Thurman, among others. While Schmidt's mentions are important, they also expose the need for a larger portrait of a Black Spiritual Left.

More specifically, I define Black Spiritual Leftists as black figures who separated from or were not part of black churches, and took on a liberal spiritual orientation. These figures often found religious homes in the folds of non-black or multiracial liberal religious circles. These liberal religious circles include, but are not limited to, organizations and religious structures such as the Unitarian Church, the Society of Friends Baha'i, or multi-racial denominationally and religiously promiscuous churches and communities. Moreover, many of the Black Spiritual Left held political commitments that were "left" of center, concerning themselves with issues such as poverty, sexism, and racism.

Representative figures of the Black Spiritual Left can be found as early as the nineteenth century. Here, one could point to the early Frederick Douglass, who held a strong proclivity for the use of Biblical higher criticism before converting to what many have viewed as atheism. The abolitionist Sojourner Truth, who had Quaker roots during its liberal theological turn in the nineteenth century, can be seen as a spiritual leftist. A Black Spiritual Leftist orientation can also be seen in the life of novelist Frances Harper, Bowie State College founder Don Goodloe, and journalist Fannie Williams, who were all members of the Unitarian church, the most theologically liberal congregation in the United States during the late nineteenth century. Black Spiritual Leftism had a more marked presence among the black intelligentsia in the early to mid-twentieth century.

As historian Barbara Savage argues in her book, *Your Spirit Walks Beside Us*, at the turn of the twentieth century through the 1950s black scholars had serious doubts about the capacity of black churches for social reform and black social upheaval. Savage maintains that black intellectuals such as Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Benjamin Mays felt that most black churches were too concerned about being heaven bound, to be any earthly good. E. Franklin Frazier, the leading black sociologist of his time, called black churches, "the most important institutional barrier to integration and the assimilation of Negroes [in the United States]."3 Perhaps due to a pervading view of black churches as being too concerned with the otherworldly, especially during the 1930s through 1950s, one begins to see many of the black intelligentsia take part in a religious migration from black churches toward more liberal expressions of spirituality.

Howard Thurman's work as a mystic, philosopher, and minister, is a major example of this generation of black intellectuals leaving black churches and creating new spaces and expressions of spirituality. Ultimately, Thurman personified a Black Spiritual Leftist's religiosity and politics. In essays and books such as "Mysticism and Social Change" (1939), "Mysticism and the Experience of Love" (1961), "Good News for the Underprivileged" (1935), and *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Thurman engaged what William Hutchinson called "the Modernist Impulse" as well as approaches to achieving social justice. Throughout Thurman's career, in these and in other works, he also molded the tools of modernist religion—such as the Biblical Higher Criticism he learned at Rochester Seminary and the pragmatic mysticism he engaged at the tutelage of Haverford Quaker Mystic Rufus Jones—in order to account for the realities of race and other forms of oppression in America. Thurman's work ultimately called us to a spirituality where one affirms that "While there is a lower class, I am in it. While there is a criminal element, I am of it. While there is a man in jail, I am not free."<4

Thurman's Black Spiritual Leftist sensibilities, expanded beyond his theological and philosophical frame works and spilled over into his ecclesiastical vision. Like other Black Spiritual Leftist of his era, Thurman found issue with black churches and primarily found a spiritual home outside of them. Dissimilar to his intellectual peers, such as Frazier, Du Bois, and Mays, Thurman did not cast aspersions on black churches for their theology or lack of social involvement. Rather, Thurman hoped for the American church in general to become an integrated institution. Thurman held it necessary for churches to be integrated spaces in order for them to uphold a kingdom of God ideal. Fellowship Church was Thurman's grand attempt to carefully nurse to life the American church which was born, as Frederick Douglass put it, with "[the] slave auctioneer's bell and. . . church-going bell [chiming]" with the same tone.<sup>5</sup>

In 1944, Thurman founded and led such a place, when he began the pastorate of a religiously liberal and multi-racial congregation. At the Fellowship Church in San Francisco, Thurman and others displayed a "racial, [economic] and cultural heterogeneity."<sup>6</sup> By 1953 the church's racial breakdown was "sixty percent Caucasian," "thirty-five percent Negro," and "five percent non-Negro."<sup>7</sup> These racial demographics of the Fellowship Church were by no means an accident. In his book, *Foot Prints of a Dream*, Thurman details Fellowship Church to move out of the black section of San Francisco into a predominantly white section in order to procure more white congregants.

Fellowship Church also attempted to break down religious barriers by taking on a religiously promiscuous posture, following Thurman, who drank deeply from the well of pluralism. Recalling his trip to India in 1935, Thurman stated, "I had to find my way to the place where I could stand side by side with a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Moslem, and know that the authenticity of [their] experience was identical with the essence and authenticity of my own."<sup>8</sup> From Thurman and others' descriptions regarding the life and work of the Fellowship Church, it seemed to match Thurman's religiously promiscuous sentiments. As Thurman biographers Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt have noted in their book, *Visions of a Better World*, the Fellowship Church's meditation room bespoke of its religious plurality: "The church....had a small meditation room that contained a painting of Gandhi (by Thurman), a statue of the Buddha...and sacred texts from a variety of faiths."<sup>9</sup>

Like Thurman and other black intellectuals and activists of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, black millennial activists of the Black Lives Matter Movement have turned away from black churches to find and form sacred spaces for expansive and justice-seeking spirituality. The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013 by three black women—Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors—after the acquittal of George Zimmerman who stood trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager in Sanford, Florida.<sup>10</sup> In a Facebook post entitled "A Love Note to Black People" following Zimmerman's acquittal, Garza implored activists to "fight back" against racism.<sup>11</sup> Garza ended the post by stating, "Our lives matter, black lives matter."<sup>12</sup> Cullors replied to the post with the now famous hashtag "#blacklivesmatter."<sup>13</sup>

Though Black Lives Matter is primarily known for its stance against police violence, the movement has also sought to push for all black people's freedom and equality. On their website, the Black Lives Matter movement declares:

Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. . . Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements.

Certainly, the Black Lives Matter movement has defined itself as a counter culture to the patriarchy and homophobia that has often pervaded black churches, colleges, and civic groups in the centuries-old struggle for black freedom and equality.

Black Lives Matter's countercultural sensibilities reflect the outlook of its founders who identify sexually as queer. Two of these women have defined themselves against the archetypical black leader who embraces traditional white Protestantism. Tometi describes herself in a spiritual leftist vein, finding "solace and guidance from her spiritual life" and being "[a] believer and practitioner of liberation theology. . . ." <sup>14</sup> Although Tometi does not claim any specific religious affiliation, she says that "spirituality informs her. . . human rights work. . . [as] justice is a spiritual practice" <sup>15</sup> Cullors, practices Ifà, a religion indigenous to Nigeria. <sup>16</sup> She confesses, "I don't believe spirit is this thing that lives outside of us dictating our lives, but rather our ability to be deeply connected to something that is bigger than us." <sup>17</sup>

The eclectic spirituality of the Black Lives Matter founders appears to have created an open space for a wide variety of spiritual expression within the movement's ranks. There have been dramatic scenes in which Black Lives Matter protesters used their religious rituals in their protest outside the home of L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti. <sup>18</sup> There were reports of "a white-clad black woman burning sage across a militarized police line. Altars using sacred images and symbols from multiple faiths placed to hold space for those murdered. [And the] [e]vents ending with prayers for the oppressed." <sup>19</sup>

The vibrant spirituality found in the Black Lives Matter Movement is the latest manifestation of Black Spiritual Leftism. The spirituality of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Howard Thurman, and other Black Spiritual Leftist, serves as a reminder that, though black churches, are

still certainly the most popular places for black religion, they are not the only places where it finds its expressions. For these particular black figures to, in a sense, throw off what many of them see as carcasses of black churches or religious dogmas they are attempting to hold the burnishing truths of religious and political experiences for themselves. In the words of Howard Thurman, they were/are listening to the sound of the genuine within themselves, rather than have their faith ever live on the strings that someone else can pull.<sup>20</sup>

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1 Here, I am pointing to scholars such as Anthony Pinn—in his work *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism*—and Judith Weisenfeld—in her works *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA 1905–1945* and *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949*

2 Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: HaperSanFrancisco, 2005), 4.

3 Barbara Savage, *Your Spirit Walks with Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 112.

4 Editor Walter Fluker, *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume 2: Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 161.

5 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Public Domain Books, Kindle Edition, 1855).

6 Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 109.

7 *Footprints of a Dream*, 109.

8 Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: the Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Mariner Books, 1981), 120.

9 Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 175.

10 "About the Black Lives Matter Network," <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>, accessed July 19, 2016.

11 Herbert Ruffin, "Black Lives Matter: The Growth of a New Social Justice Movement," [www.blackpast.org/perspectives/black-lives-matter-growth-new-social-justice-movement](http://www.blackpast.org/perspectives/black-lives-matter-growth-new-social-justice-movement), accessed July 18, 2016

12 Herbert Ruffin, "Black Lives Matter: The Growth of a New Social Justice Movement".

13 Herbert Ruffin, "Black Lives Matter: The Growth of a New Social Justice Movement".

14 Opal Tometi, "Justice+Spirituality," <http://opaltometi.com/spirituality/>, accessed July 19, 2016

15 Tometi, "Justice+Spirituality," <http://opaltometi.com/spirituality/>

16 Hebah Farrag, "The Role of Spirit in the #BLACKLIVESMATTER Movement: A Conversation with Activist and Artist Patrisse Cullors," *Religion Dispatches*, [religiondispatches.org/the-role-of-spirit-in-the-blacklivesmatter-movement-a-conversation-with-activist-and-artist-patrisse-cullors/](http://religiondispatches.org/the-role-of-spirit-in-the-blacklivesmatter-movement-a-conversation-with-activist-and-artist-patrisse-cullors/).

17 Farrag, "The Role of Spirit in the #BLACKLIVESMATTER Movement: A Conversation with Activist and Artist Patrisse Cullors."

18 Farrag, "The Role of Spirit in the #BLACKLIVESMATTER Movement: A Conversation with Activist and Artist Patrisse Cullors."

19 Farrag, "The Role of Spirit in the #BLACKLIVESMATTER Movement: A Conversation with Activist and Artist Patrisse Cullors."

20 Walter E. Fluker, *Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility, and Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 75.

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