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Mystic as Prophet: The Deep Freedom of Thomas Merton and Howard Thurman

William Apel

> The contemplative life is not,
> and cannot be, a mere withdrawal, a
> pure negation, or a turning of one's
> back on the world with its sufferings,
> its crises, its confusions and its errors.[1]

> ...all my life I have been seeking to
> to validate, beyond all ambivalence and
> frustration, the integrity of the inner
> life. I have sensed the urgency to find
> a way to act and react responsibly out
> of my own center.[2]

1. Mystic as Prophet

Perhaps the rarest of all human beings is the mystic as prophet. There are few who have successfully combined a life of contemplation with a prophetic call to social justice. Howard Thurman (1900–81) and Thomas Merton (1915–68) are two such individuals. As beacons of light in a world clouded by violence, war and racial bigotry, this African-American minister, and this Trappist monk, have illumined the way for many.

These two spiritual masters served both as mystics and prophets in their time and place. Those at all familiar with Merton know of his sense of vocation as a contemplative in an age of action. Thurman also shared

1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1964), p. xiii.

2. Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 115; Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961), pp. 4-5.

a similar commitment to self and community. As mystic as prophet, he clearly recognized the necessity of social transformation (the prophetic) for enabling and responding to personal religious experience (the mystical). This is evident when Thurman says:

> Therefore, the mystic's concern with the imperative of social action is not merely to improve the condition of society. It is not merely to feed the hungry, not merely to relieve human suffering and human misery. If this were all, in and of itself, it would be important surely. But this is not all. The basic consideration has to do with the removal of all that prevents God from coming to himself in the life of the individual. Whatever there is that blocks this, calls for action.[3]

Thurman's description here of the mystic as prophet fits well the case of Thomas Merton who himself has been called everything from mystic to prophet and most things in between!

These two spiritual teachers of a kindred spirit, although contemporaries, never met. Thurman certainly knew of Merton, but I have no evidence that the reverse was true.[4] However, they shared a similar orientation to life (the contemplative in a world of action), and they inspired countless others to share in their prophetic witness. Thurman can rightfully be described as one of the key spiritual architects of the Civil Rights movement. Thomas Merton, in a related fashion, can certainly be identified as an unofficial chaplain for the Catholic peace and justice movement of the same historic era.[5]

This article seeks to bring together these two 'mystics as prophets' for the very first time. They themselves would enjoy the meeting and there are many lessons to be learned in their creative combination of a life of spirituality and social justice. In fact, from our distance in time, we can see more clearly than earlier the contours of a spiritual landscape common to both Merton and Thurman. Merton, as we know, had his mountains to climb and Thurman, as we shall see, had his rivers to cross. The destination for both was freedom—a deep freedom intended for all humanity within the creative genius of God.

3. The definitive work on Howard Thurman's life and thought is Luther E. Smith's *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1992). The quote used here is taken from Thurman's address 'Mysticism and Social Action', delivered at the Lawrence Lecture on Religion and Society at the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, 13 October 1978.

4. From my knowledge of Thurman's personal library and reading habits, I can assert that he was acquainted with Merton's writings—at least in a cursory fashion. On the other hand, I can find no direct references to Thurman's work in Merton's writings.

5. Paul Wilkes (ed.), *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 47.

Before turning to a comparative analysis of the views of these two spiritual masters on freedom, it is appropriate to consider some of the pitfalls of doing comparative biographies. There is a sense in which no individual can enter fully into another's life. This is as true for the trained biographer as for any other human being. We are all beggars at the gate and can never gain full admittance into someone else's life and work. However, Merton and Thurman are somewhat unique in that they invite the reader in. Almost everything written by these two mystics as prophets contains an invitation of sorts. Indeed, this is one essential element of their vocation, their witness to humanity. With head and heart, they themselves open the gate, and so, without further delay we enter in—only in the end, to discover something of our better selves.

2. Meet Howard Thurman

Howard Thurman was an original. He was an American thinker and spiritual teacher about whom it could be said, 'There was something Mertonesque about him!' This Black theologian, preacher and poet spoke often of the elemental nature of one's existence before God, and of a path that could lead to freedom and true community. Thurman's spirituality was wedded to a social ethic which envisioned the hopeful possibility of a religion without rancor within a society without racial segregation.

Thurman, like Merton, projected a vision of community in which free individuals abide. He worked for this kind of community in his university chaplaincy at Howard and Boston Universities, and at Fellowship Church in San Francisco—the first multiracial, multicultural church in America, founded in 1944. He engendered this spirit of freedom and community in the thousands he inspired, including those within the next generations of African-American leaders—in addition to Martin Luther King, Jr, individuals in politics, art, and culture such as Jesse Jackson, Alice Walker, Arthur Ashe and James Cone.

As with Merton, to understand Thurman's spiritual and moral contributions, one must know and appreciate the challenges and demands of his life. In childhood, Thurman was confronted with the racism and violence of his hometown of Daytona, Florida. However, young Howard determined that this could not be the full meaning of life. In the world of nature, he sensed a divine presence which seemed absent from his racially divided, social world. Thurman was to write of these early experiences, 'There were times when it seemed as if the earth and the river and the sky and I were one beat of the same pulse'. He continued: 'There would come a moment when beyond the single pulse beat there

was a sense of presence, which seemed to speak to me'.[6] In this presence, Thurman had his first encounters with God; he came to understand this presence as the same dynamic power in which he lived, and moved, and had his being. Of these luminous experiences, Thurman later wrote, 'There was no voice. There was no vision. There was God'.[7]

Thomas Merton would have resonated with this inward spiritual experience which he too came to know so well. Writing in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton offered these perceptive remarks from his own experience:

> And if you allow yourself to remain in silence and emptiness you may find that this thirst, this hunger that seeks God in blindness and darkness, will grow on you and at the same time, although you do not yet seem to find anything tangible, peace will establish itself in your soul.[8]

That is exactly what happened to Thurman. Without fully comprehending, young Howard had begun to move almost unperceptively into the life of God.

As a result of these kinds of experiences, Thurman developed a contemplative view of life. He often declared that the contradictions of life are not final. Again as with Merton, Thurman's inner experiences eventually led him to a compassion for God and others which was life-affirming and not life-negating. In accord with the quotes that introduced my argument, he came to believe that the spiritual and the ethical dimensions of human existence are inseparable. The inner life and outer life are indivisible. Thurman's discovery that he was loved and affirmed at the very core of his being led him into the world and not out of it. He was certain that the inner spiritual life and the outer moral life were of one piece. This too would prove to be Merton's experience—especially after his 'Louisville epiphany'—the event on which the Seventh International Merton Society meeting on the Bellarmine University campus focused.

3. Visions of Freedom

Thurman too had a 'Louisville epiphany'. His occurred in 1931 at the Khyber Pass in India, overlooking a trade caravan which was making its way from Afghanistan.[9] Thurman realized at that moment that he was

6. Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 96.
7. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, p. 96.
8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 241.
9. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 136.

related to all other human beings—and they to him. He was not at all different from the strangers in the approaching caravan. There were no strangers, no other—only God and God's human family. He resolved, then and there, that he must work to change an American society dominated by racism and violence. Its very existence was an affront to God's creative intentions. After Khyber Pass, everything looked fresh and new to Thurman. For a brief, shining moment, he caught a compelling glimpse of God's glory and humanity's destiny. It was enough!

In 1931, Thurman became the first African-American to meet Mahatma Gandhi. This helped confirm his conviction that a new kind of human community was indeed possible—a community that was spiritually centered, non-violent, and free.[10] Thurman believed that, as children of God, African-Americans would need to begin to express themselves in their own voice as a free people. This was his first important step to freedom. Without it, there could be no hope of an inclusive community of love and justice which Thurman envisioned. Blacks and Whites, along with all other peoples, must stand together as equals—each with their own voice and identity.

Upon his return to America, Thurman, who had been the chaplain at Howard University (arguably, America's premier Black institution of higher education), readied himself for an opportunity to put his inclusive vision into operation. That chance came when in 1944 Thurman co-founded the first truly interracial, multicultural church in the United States—the aforementioned Church of the Fellowship of All Peoples. For over a decade, he pastored this congregation. From its leadership on down he had created a religious community of Blacks, Whites, and Asians living together in mutual respect and freedom.[11]

Howard Thurman rejected all intellectual restraints and psychological chains that had been imposed on Black Americans and other minority groups. For the sake of a redemptive community of inclusion, he insisted that inward freedom and outward liberation be linked as one. Indeed, Thurman himself projected this image of freedom wherever he went. At his funeral, the great educator Benjamin Mays said of Thurman:

> Those who have read his books knew that Howard was a free man. Freedom leaped out in every direction, whether in sermons, articles, books,

10. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, pp. 130-35.

11. The story of this remarkable experiment in the creation of an inclusive congregation and fellowship can be found in Thurman's *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church of the Fellowship of All Peoples* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).

> one knew that Howard was free. He walked like a free man. He wrote like a free man. He spoke like a free man.[12]

The same could be said, of course, for Thomas Merton. He too was a free man! According to Jean Leclercq:

> Now Merton was a free man. A very good Trappist, he joined with joy and he swallowed everything – at the beginning. After a few years he started asking, 'What that, why this?'[13]

Like Thurman, Merton understood that the true self can only be realized in freedom – a freedom that leads to questioning the status quo and discovering God, the God of freedom, who dwells both within and without.

Merton's persistent questioning led to an awakening of the authentic self – something as elusive as the mysteries of God. As William Shannon notes, Merton put it this way:

> The inner self is as secret as God, and like Him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession. It is a life that cannot be held and studied as an object, because it is not 'a thing'.[14]

Just as God could not be possessed, neither could one's true self be defined or possessed – certainly not by others. In *Seeds of Destruction* (1964) and *Faith and Violence* (1968), Merton advanced his own notion of the free, authentic self. The historical situation into which he spoke, in part, was the struggle of African-Americans to be heard. He honored self-identity and autonomy – finding one's true self in God was, for Merton, at the center of the human enterprise. There could be no true redemption without freedom, and no real freedom without voice. Undergirded by this theological insight, Merton, unlike most Whites, resisted the majority culture's definition of African Americans in White terms. His *Seeds of Destruction* (1964) makes this explicit.

In his classic work *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Howard Thurman had earlier done the same thing. He sought to understand the connection between personal freedom and communion with God from his perspective as an African-American. He minced no words. He asked his readers to consider what liberating word the life and teachings of Jesus might have to say to those who stand, at a given moment in human history, with 'their backs against the wall'.[15] Thurman was clear in his assertion:

12. Benjamin E. Mays, 'Tribute', *Debate and Understanding* (Spring 1982 special edn on Howard Thurman), p. 87.

13. Wilkes (ed.), *Merton*, p. 130.

14. William H. Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton, his Life and Works* (Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1997), p. 87.

15. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 11.

he was not asking how those with backs against the wall might be helped by others who responded to Jesus' gospel of love. This was the old missionary question. Rather, he was asking what word Jesus himself had for the oppressed. Thurman, like Merton would discover, understood that the answer to this question could come only from the oppressed themselves—out of their own experience of oppression, in their own voice.

In the very first chapter of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman recalled a rigorous confrontation between himself and a Hindu educator in Sri Lanka during the early '30s. This particular Hindu wanted to know how Thurman, a Black man, could participate in a White-European religion like Christianity—a religion that historically had provided theological justification for the enslavement of his own people. The Hindu was polite but uncompromising:

> I do not wish to seem rude to you. But sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker people of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position?[16]

Thurman knew his response to this kind of accusation must be grounded in the specific meaning of Jesus' life and teachings. He did not disagree with his critic's assessment of Christianity's complicity in the brutalization of African-American slaves. However, in his response, Thurman made a crucial distinction between the religion *of* Jesus and the religion *about* Jesus. He spoke unapologetically about his commitment to Jesus and distinguished it from the violent and brutal actions done in Jesus' name by many European and American Christians.

Thurman especially rejected pronouncements about Jesus' life and teachings that ignored the details of Jesus' own historical reality. He knew from experience that such abstractions were often used as spiritual and cultural camouflage for the suppression of his own people. He had observed first-hand how White racists repressed particular truths about the African-American experience—all in the name of some so-called national or eternal 'truth'. Thurman would not permit a similar fate to befall his Jesus. The Galilean of Thurman's faith was not to be robbed of his first-century identity. Thurman insisted upon an accurate portrait of Jesus' historical particularity—only in this way could he make clear to his Hindu critic, and others, why he followed Jesus, and why this did not make him a traitor to the 'darker people of the earth'.

Thurman cautioned: 'We begin with the simple historical fact that Jesus was a Jew'. But this in itself is too generalized a statement. He

16. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 15.

continued: 'Jesus was a poor Jew...Jesus was a member of a minority group in the midst of a larger dominant and controlling group'.[17] Thurman emphasized Jesus' lack of status within his first-century world. This fact, he believed, spoke directly to the African-American experience. In Thurman's poignant words: 'If a Roman soldier pushed Jesus into a Palestinian ditch—it was just another Jew in the ditch'.[18] Blacks in America knew what that was like.

White people, according to Thurman, frequently obscured these crucial facts which shaped who Jesus was. Being a Jew, being poor, being oppressed by the Roman imperium—such conditions shaped Jesus' entire view of God and the society in which he lived. Indeed, it was out of this historical context that Jesus came preaching the gospel of God. Thurman reminded his readers this was a specific gospel of hope for 'Those who stand, at a moment in history, with their backs against the wall'. In sum, Thurman embraced a revolutionary gospel. Writing consciously in the present tense, he declared: 'Jesus Christ is on the side of freedom, liberty, and justice for all people, black, white, red, yellow, saint, sinner, rich or poor'.[19]

4. A Disturbing Freedom

Thurman and Merton both projected a disturbing kind of freedom grounded in the liberating gospel of Christ. Following Jesus, their faith and solidarity with the disinherited was unmistakable. They joined in common cause with all those, Black and White, who worked for freedom. In Thurman's case, his sermons and writings became well known among a new generation of African-American leaders. Historian Vincent Harding reports that Martin Luther King, Jr, carried a copy of Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* with him into the civil rights marches of the late '50s and early '60s.[20] Such was the spiritual impact of Thurman's disturbing freedom.

Merton also shared in this disturbing sense of freedom. He sensed early in the Civil Rights era that self-determination and Black identity would be a great challenge for America—particularly for White liberals.

17. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, pp. 15-19.

18. This source comes from an unidentified tape recording of a Lenten Series preached by Dr Thurman and given to me by Marvin Chandler, a colleague and friend in Thurman's later years.

19. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, p. 114.

20. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, unnumbered page. In his foreword, Vincent Harding writes that '...some accounts indicate, that Martin Luther King, Jr. often carried a copy of *Jesus and the Disinherited* on many of his journeys'.

He predicted that the greatest hindrance to Black freedom in America would come from White supporters, not White racists. Along these same lines, Thurman noted that the world suffered from a great deal of misplaced good will which hampered freedom's cause. White liberals, as well as segregationists, found it almost impossible to view reality from the eyes of the oppressed. For all their good intentions, they could not get beyond their own liberal definitions of what oppression meant. (Merton, as we shall see, also grasped this key limitation of the White liberal perspective.)

According to Thurman, so much of what was called 'good will' was misplaced and could actually be an obstruction to freedom. What was missing was what he called 'informed good will'. Thurman wrote: 'There is no substitute for the hard understanding of more and more of another's fact'. Taking the time and energy necessary to *know* the other is very difficult work. Thurman said this must be done for it 'serves as a corrective against doing violence to those for whom we have a sense of caring'. The majority always thinks it knows what is best for the minority. 'This', in Thurman's analysis, 'is generally the weakness in so much lateral good will in the world'.[21]

These observations by Thurman could be pages taken from Thomas Merton's own essays on race and religion. Merton, in essays collected in *Faith and Violence*, emphasized his need to listen clearly to the voices of African-Americans. He put aside what Thurman had already called 'the weakness in so much lateral good will'. He was determined not to put words in the mouths of black leaders. His place was one of support, not leadership. Merton wrote:

> ...I for one remain *for* the Negro. I trust him. I recognize the overwhelming justice of his complaint, I confess I have no right whatever to get in his way, and that as a Christian I owe him my support, not in his ranks but in my own, among the whites who refuse to trust him or hear him, and who want to destroy him.[22]

In 'Letters to a White Liberal' published in *Seeds of Destruction*, Merton asserted that most of his fellow workers for civil rights within the White community ultimately would act in their own self-interest. To White liberals he wrote:

> ...when our own personal interests and preferences are concerned, we have no intention of respecting the Negro's right in the concrete; North or South, integration is always to be not on our street but 'somewhere else'.[23]

21. Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, p. 15.

22. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 129.

23. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 21.

According to Merton, 'That is why the Negro now insists on making himself just as obviously visible as he can'.[24] Merton had learned well from his readings and reflections on the works of Black leaders as diverse as Martin Luther King, Jr, and Malcolm X. Blacks must lead, Whites must support and follow in these matters.

Like few others in America's majority culture, Merton pressed for divestment of White power. Writing to white liberals, Merton observed:

> ...with your good will and your ideals, your fine hopes and your generous, but vague, love of mankind in the abstract and of rights enthroned in the juridical Olympus, you offer a certain encouragement to the Negro...so that abetted by you, he is emboldened to demand concessions.[25]

Yet, Merton knew that most White liberals would pull back when the issues of power and self-determination came to the front of the social agenda—as they did. He described the dilemma of the Black leader.

> Though he knows you will not support all his demands, he is well aware that you will be forced to support some of them in order to maintain your image of yourself as a liberal. He also knows, however, that your material comforts, your security, and your congenial relations with the establishment are much more important to you than your volatile idealism, and that when the game gets rough you will be quick to see your own interests menaced by his demands. And you will sell him down the river for the five hundredth time in order to protect yourself.[26]

With a steadfast realism, Thurman, too, insisted upon speaking in the concrete and not in the abstract. He had often declared:

> To speak of love for humanity is meaningless. There is no such thing as humanity. What we call humanity has a name, was born, lives on a street, gets hungry, needs all the particular things we need. As an abstract, it has no reality whatsoever.[27]

Merton himself knew of this need to be concrete in matters of love. He had carefully placed a photo of 11-year-old Carol Denise McNair in his journal: she was one of four African-American girls killed in the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.[28] Merton and Thurman insisted that love's purpose is to love. There can be nothing abstract about it!

24. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 21.
25. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 33.
26. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 33.
27. Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, p. 15.
28. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 157.

Merton, on his part, was adamant about honoring the identity of human beings according to their own self-definitions. This was nowhere more true than in his book *Ishi Means Man* (1968). Consisting of five essays on indigenous peoples of the Americas, this small volume was inspired by the anthropologist Theodora Kroeber whose *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* introduced Merton to the last of the survivors of the Mill Creek Indians.[29]

Everything about Ishi's story was prime evidence of what goes wrong when one group of people determines that another group is dispensable. Merton in his key essay in *Ishi Means Man* called 'Ishi: A Meditation' documents the destruction of the Mill Creek Indians by ranchers in the Sacramento valley of California during the 1860s and 1870s. Because the traditional hunting grounds of Ishi's people were emptied of game for grazing purposes of the homesteaders, the Mill Creek Indians were forced to raid the ranches of White settlers.

The response was all too familiar. Whites determined that Ishi's people must be completely destroyed. The ranchers considered the 'savages' on their newly claimed land to be barbarians, less than human. They must be destroyed. By 1870 they were down to their last 20 or 30 survivors. In order to survive, the Mill Creek Indians withdrew into the hills. One survivor, a young boy named Ishi, lived in isolation from White civilization until 1911. With the death of Ishi's mother and sister, Ishi surrendered to the White race. Up until then, the very small remnant of the Mill Creek Indians had managed to avoid all contact with the world outside their remote hills existence.[30]

What fascinated Merton about this story is the four and a half years of Ishi's life lived among White people. Befriended by Theodora Kroeber and taken to the San Francisco Bay area, Ishi was able to teach his unknown language and cultural ways before his death to tuberculosis in 1916. However, Ishi's true name remained undisclosed—something too precious and sacred for the White world which had done everything in its power to destroy his people and way of life.

The irony is not lost on Merton. As the title of his book suggested, Ishi means (literally) man. The one who called himself 'Ishi' had never revealed his personal name. Merton had learned from Kroeber that the Mill Creek Indians (like other California Indians) never uttered their true

29. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroads, 1993), pp. 226-28. Here is found an excellent summary of Merton's interest in Ishi and Ishi's relationship to anthropologist Theodora Kroeber.

30. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, Inc., 1976), pp. 25-32.

names. No individual or group could control that part of their identity. Here freedom was maintained. As Merton wrote, 'In the end, no one ever found out a single name of the vanished community. Not even Ishi's. For Ishi simply means MAN'.[31]

Thurman also knew that human beings are not defined by the outside world. Regardless of how much control others seem to exercise over the individual self, there is a core not touched by external definition. As with Ishi, our true self cannot ultimately be the possession of others—no matter what power they seem to hold. Whereas the story of Ishi reminded Merton of this most basic of truths; in Thurman's case, it was his grandmother's story.

Thurman's grandmother, born a slave, guarded and nurtured his sensitive spirit during childhood. According to Thurman, whenever his spirit hit rock bottom, his grandmother Ambrose would buoy him up with a story from her slave days on a south Florida plantation. In this story she would recount for Thurman how once or twice a year a slave preacher, one who himself was a slave, was permitted to preach to his fellow slaves without the slave masters being present. The slave preacher would deliver a powerful sermon which always ended the same way. Without flinching, the slave preacher would look his congregation square in the eye and declare with all the force he could muster, 'You are not niggers! You are not slaves! You are God's children'.[32]

This was a crucial theological discovery for Thurman. It was a lesson that he would never forget. He now knew his true identity, his true name as it were—he was a child of God. No person, or no group of people, could take that away from him. As a child of God, he was freed of all racist definitions of his being. Like Ishi of Merton's story, Thurman knew *who* and *whose* he truly was.

Both Thurman and Merton spoke truth to power with great clarity. They clearly delineated love in all its particularity. Here was the mystic as prophet speaking from the depths of his own spiritual understanding and witnessing for those without voice—those who have been denied their God-given right to selfhood.

Mystics as prophets are indeed great disturbers of society. But their role is not the same as the social activist. Many encouraged Thurman and Merton to take to the streets during the turbulent 1960s. However, they remained apart—contemplatives in an age of action. Both struggled, at times, with a desire to enter the public arena of protest, but in the end they did not. Neither were marchers, neither took to the streets.

31. Merton, *Ishi Means Man*, p. 32.
32. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, p. 21.

There were some who said Thurman and Merton should have come out from behind their spirituality—be marchers, be demonstrators in the forefront of American protest. And in this regard, the mystic as prophet may be vulnerable to criticism on political grounds. But Thurman and Merton knew that in their vocation of mystics as prophet, they too had to refuse to allow others to define their tasks. They knew that their witness to social justice must be done in their own way. The reality of their deep freedom needed to embrace both the penultimate and the ultimate, history and eternity. To this end, some were called to be activists; others like Thurman and Merton remained contemplatives but engaged contemplatives with prophetic voice.

5. Crossing Rivers and Climbing Mountains

Thurman's book, *Deep River*, is a classic representation of this kind of inclusive theological perspective. In *Deep River*, Thurman recalled the powerful metaphor of the river found in a black spiritual of the same name. It identified freedom with both the penultimate and ultimate issues of life and death.

> Deep River, my home is over Jordan;
> Deep River, my home is over Jordan.
> O don't you want to go to that Gospel Feast
> That promised Land where all is Peace?
> Deep river, I want to cross over into campground.[33]

Thurman emphasized that this song of his forbears expressed freedom's reality in both a particular and universal way. He noted, 'To slip over the river from one of the border states would mean a chance for freedom in the North—or, to cross the river into Canada would mean freedom in a new country, a foreign land'.[34] This represented the song's specific, historical meaning. However, it also contained a broader, more universal meaning.

Without denying the particular, Thurman turned to the universal. He explained that the river in this spiritual is 'a full and creative analogy' for life itself and its movement toward God.[35] The song, first and foremost, was a cry for freedom within the historical circumstances of a slave people. But on a more universal level, like the river itself, all humanity is seen by Thurman moving from obscure origins into the great currents of

33. Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, IN: Friends Untied Press, 1975), p. 70.

34. Thurman, *Deep River*, p. 70.

35. Thurman, *Deep River*, p. 71.

life—always flowing toward the sea, toward ultimate freedom in God.

In the first place, Thurman reasoned, rivers have simple beginnings. Yet it is the nature of a river to flow from its source. Thurman says, 'Life is like that'.[36] We move from almost imperceptible origins into the great currents of life. Like the river we too are always on the move, always living in a dynamic and changing flow toward the sea—our goal.

Also, the river itself is alive! Thurman writes, 'It's this aliveness that generates and sustains all the particular manifestations of life'. All judgments about life are incomplete because our lives, like the river, never stand still. 'It is for this reason that in the last analysis judgment belongs with God', reasoned Thurman.[37] He further expands his analogy. We are perhaps most like the banks of the rivers.

> Every bank that is touched by a river gives of itself to the water. It has no option: it is the nature of the relationship that the bank yield of itself to the river that drains it...Life is like that! If we think for a moment of the individual as the bank of the river of life and of life as the river, the analogy becomes fascinating.[38]

Thus for Thurman our ultimate identity and freedom is in God—the very source and goal of all life. For Thurman, the river provides an image for the crossing over to freedom in this life but also an image for an eternal life in God.

Merton charted this same course of freedom in the ascent of his many mountains. Michael Mott's biography of Merton, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, has presented convincingly the literal and metaphorical mountains of Merton's life and thought.[39] The ascent of mountains has the same powerful spiritual imagery as Thurman's crossing of rivers. To journey up mountains and across rivers is to make one's own pilgrimage. The source and goal of the journey is the same—God. And God in this imagery, whether river or mountain, is ever the God of freedom. For the mystic as prophet, the journey Godward is at one and the same time a journey toward lasting freedom. For Thurman and Merton, the self can only be the true self when it is free. Community can only be true community when it is peopled by free individuals—those committed to each other's well-being in freedom. And God can only be fully present when all restraints are removed and no limits are placed upon peace and justice.

36. Thurman, *Deep River*, p. 71.
37. Thurman, *Deep River*, p. 72.
38. Thurman, *Deep River*, p. 73.
39. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993), p. xxiii.

This idea of Godward ascent in freedom is powerfully presented in Merton's eight freedom songs written in 1964 at the request of Robert Lawrence Williams, a young Black tenor. According to William H. Shannon, Merton was initially enthusiastic about the project and believed they should be an authentic expression of African-Americans' struggle for their civil rights written in the tradition of the Black spiritual and blues with the jazz element clearly evident.[40] After a rather complicated course of events, Merton's poems were finally set to music by composer Alexander Peloquin and first performed at the 1968 Liturgical Conference in Washington, DC in memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr.

In these poems, Merton is drawn to the same biblical themes of deep freedom that Thurman himself found and experienced in the spirituals of his people. Patrick F. O'Connell provides an excellent analysis of Merton's eight freedom songs in *The Merton Annual* 7. For the present consideration, I would like to lift up lines from the third of Merton's freedom poems named 'All the Way Down'. Here is found the descent and ascent so familiar to the freedom trail. Thurman would have known from personal experience all that Merton describes:

> I went down
> Into the cavern
> All the way down
> To the bottom of the sea.
> I went down lower
> Than Jonas and the whale
> No one ever got so far down
> as me.[41]

The struggle for freedom takes people very low indeed. Thurman, no doubt, would recall a familiar refrain from the spirituals, 'Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, Lord. Nobody knows my sorrow'. Thurman himself went so low that his grandmother's words had to pick him up again and again. Knowing of the toll that the Civil Rights movement took on Martin Luther King, Jr, the more senior Thurman would provide spiritual nurture and pastoral encouragement.[42]

Thurman and Merton, as contemplatives in a time of action, pastored those on the front lines. They knew from their own experiences and

40. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, pp. 234-38. This is a valuable history of the origin and development of Merton's freedom poems as they were finally set to music, a time spanning from 1964 to 1968.

41. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 669.

42. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, pp. 254-55. See Thurman's poignant account of his hospital visit to Martin Luther King, Jr.

reflections that one must go down to the depths—lower than even Jonas and the whale. But they also knew of the glorious ascent. They knew of not only the cross but also the resurrection. In 'All the Way Down' Merton also writes this affirmation:

> But when they thought
> That I was gone forever
> That I was all the way
> In hell
> I got right back into my body
> And came back out
> And rang my bell.[43]

Ringing the bell. This is none other than the reality of deep freedom spoken and lived out by the mystic and prophet.

In sum, Merton and Thurman spoke the word of God. This is indeed the cry of the oppressed. This is the sacred word presented by Thomas Merton and Howard Thurman in the century just past. This continues to be the word for today. The human race still has its mountains to climb and its rivers to cross—having done so, it will finally discover God's greatest gift: freedom. On this, Merton and Thurman would surely agree.

43. Merton, *The Collected Poems*, p. 670.