

Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic: Creatively Encountering Oneness

Philosophy, in all of its forms, entices the practitioner to participate in a quest for knowledge, while offering no guarantees of a discovery of truth, but only giving a faint assurance that it is the search which makes it possible to actualize the full potential of all that can be called human ability. With this understanding, many are conscripted to seek an understanding of the world as a whole, while also speculating on the nature of the Holy. The climatic end to a lifelong search, which harmonizes one man's understanding of the world as a whole, consists of a single volume with the title, "*The Search for Common Ground.*" This man, Howard Thurman, through the use of science and mysticism becomes what Bertrand Russell depicts as the greatest of men. This feat is accomplished through Thurman's use of a horizontally referenced logical system, which was founded upon the philosophically based mysticism of the Renaissance. Therefore, his basic premise, which focuses on the mystic claim of the oneness of all, is demonstrated in such statements as, "This is a living world," offered as means to a conclusive moment of understanding that life is eternally interconnected. In this research, an exposition of the philosophic method of theology used by Thurman will be given so as to demonstrate its logical form along with its experiential nature. From this exposition, Thurman's tenuous position within Black Theology will be bolstered, while also locating Thurman within the greater discussion of philosophy of religion in general.

Mysticism and Logic are concepts, which because of the polarity that exist in their definitions; they are seldom discussed within the same space. Whenever the two are lifted to a focus, logic is aggrandized, while mysticism is disparaged. However, in an early article written by Bertrand Russell entitled "Mysticism and Logic," from which the title

of this present work precedes, the two concepts are exposed, giving credence to both, while concurrently illuminating the strengths and weaknesses of each. While not wanting to give mysticism credence as a means of determining truth, Russell lauded mysticism for what he denoted as a reverence and an emotion that develops the best of what is humanity. In spite of the speculative nature of mysticism, Russell was willing to concede to mysticism as being another way of knowing, although he considered the insights eternally misguided.

Howard Thurman often described as a poet, mystic, philosopher, and theologian, is generally absent from any conversation in which philosophical or theological ideas are discussed for their revealed truths. Thurman's writings have been relegated to serving as little more than inspirational literature. Thurman's theoretical discourse grappled with the cosmological structure of the universe, the nature of God, and the interrelatedness of humanity to existence. It was through these dialogs and others that Thurman realized his philosophy of community, which facilitated his desire to minister to the Church for the Fellowship of All People, which was the first interracial, interdenominational, interfaith assembly of worship in the United States. However, Thurman continues tangentially as a discursive subject in theology and in philosophy. A tangential existence, in spite of, having cleverly interjected into the discussion his personal experience with race, in the style of autoethnography, to demonstrate the immoral nature of American Christendom, which he was persuaded to believe condoned separatist and racist activity.

Thurman, through his mystical logic, produced a dialectic aimed at demonstrating the necessity of the communal experience for the individual and the necessity of particular communities to be in community with other particular communities,

consequently forming much larger communities, such as nations. Thurman understood the purpose of humanity to be that of actualizing full potential, which could only be done in community, because for Thurman, humans were part of a harmonious whole. If individuals can only actualize full potential in community, then full potential for humanity as a whole, according to Thurman, must reflect the principle of interrelatedness found in community. While Thurman's theoretical discourse of mysticism was not original, his application of mysticism to the racial problems of his day was unique.

It was an application based on Thurman's logic of cosmic unity, which reached into the realm of speculative philosophy. Thurman wrote twenty books; however, not all were intended to outline theological arguments. Most were designated as books of poetry, meditations, and sermons; however, of the others, it can be said that in them Thurman delineates his theory by using logic, paradox, and analogy. Two works, in particular, layout the central tenets of Thurman's ideas while also applying these ideas to Thurman's humanistic concerns. The first, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, details, in five chapters, Thurman's understanding of the human experience. While doing so, Thurman also describes his cosmology in short detail. For Thurman, this is a living world, there is commonness in the agent of life, and that agent is also alive. This agent, which has its origin in God, is expressed in all things that are alive. These premises are quite common to many, who can be thought of as mystics, but Thurman extends this line of reasoning to include the realization of the unity or commonness in all living things as they actualize their full potential. Thurman bases his acceptance of the fundamental unity of living things in the observation of the rhythm or repetition of basic patterns within all living things. For Thurman, living things begin to pursue their potential out a desire toward

unity. Once unity is reached, the living entities are now able to fully actualize their potential.

In the second of these works, *The Search for Common Ground*, Thurman first alludes to the fact that a certain group of his works could be read as if they were one extended work with the aforementioned work providing the conclusion to such works.