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To cite this article: Anthony Sean Neal (2017): Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic: Creatively Encountering Oneness – A Logical Analysis of Thurman's Theology, Black Theology, DOI: [10.1080/14769948.2017.1359008](https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2017.1359008)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2017.1359008>



Published online: 01 Aug 2017.



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# Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic: Creatively Encountering Oneness – A Logical Analysis of Thurman's Theology

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## ABSTRACT

Howard Thurman is described on his book covers, which were published during his lifetime, as a poet, mystic, philosopher, and theologian. Aside from this description, locating Thurman among other philosophers and theologians has been difficult owing to the description of his work as non-systematic. In this paper, I argue that (i) Howard Thurman can be located, historically, among other philosophical theologians in general and more specifically as a precursor to Black Theology because of his allowance for his experience to inform him. Then (ii), I also assert that he was systematic in his approach to philosophy and that such an approach was through a mystic framework, which is described in detail here, for the first time.

## KEYWORDS

Mystic experience; Plotinus; neoplatonism; perceptual framework; mysticism; intuition; cosmic unity

## Introduction

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. Howard Thurman's life represents the climatic end to a lifelong search, which harmonizes one man's understanding of the world as a whole with the philosophical and theological language that facilitated his discourse. This search culminates with a single volume entitled, *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.<sup>1</sup> This feat is accomplished through Thurman's use of a horizontally referenced logical system, such as Gadamer's conception of the fusion of horizons; also this logical system contains loose roots in 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,"<sup>2</sup> is offered as a means to a conclusive moment of understanding that life is eternally interconnected. In this research, an exposition of the philosophic method of

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<sup>1</sup>Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, 1–30.

<sup>2</sup>Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 17–21.

theology used by Thurman will be given so as to display 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.

### **Theological Question – Why Is Thurman's Theology Generally Overlooked and How Can It Work Within Black Theology?**

Howard Thurman was an introspective person by nature, even in his youth. His written production consisted of the words that he found illumined what he perceived as the human experience in the world mediated by the constant inner desire to exist in a world conducive to the actualization of human potential. Although Thurman was not intent upon delineating philosophical concepts for the purpose of placing technical terms and ideas into a more utilitarian language, he did set his aim upon utilizing his philosophical framework to confront issues, which he felt hindered the fulfilment of human potential. His philosophical framework was established upon a tripartite structure inclusive of a cosmology, ontology, and a philosophical anthropology. The implied queries at work in Thurman's philosophy of religion are what is God, what is the relationship between God and existence, also what is the correlative meaning for humanity. Based upon this trajectory of thought, which developed in reference to these queries, Thurman spoke to the necessity of community in the social transformation of society.

To truly understand Howard Thurman as a philosopher is to discuss in phenomenological manner the way in which he saw himself situated within this modes of thought. If this is to be done properly, Thurman can never separate from his experience of Blackness in the "Modern Era."<sup>3</sup> It also requires the proper placement of his ideas concerning God as the ground of being and the God/man relationship into the proper context. Since it is Thurman who makes the claim that much of his understanding of God was directly influenced by his grandmother and also what he witnessed through nature, a proper contextualization can only be achieved by understanding Thurman thoroughly as a nexus between whatever remnant of African thought remained embodied in his grandmother (Nancy Burroughs) and the frameworks he adopted through rigorous research. These frameworks were utilized by Thurman to explicate the harmonization of his experience in nature and the experience mediated through his grandmother. Accomplishing this task will involve an unfolding of the fundamental philosophical concepts found in Thurman's corpus while also demonstrating the inclusion of Thurman's ideas within the greater discourses of Black Theology and Philosophy.

James Cone initially outlines Black Theology, as a genre of Christian Theology or a theological framework through which to read the biblical text. To claim that Thurman was a proponent of Black Theology (proper) would be to contextually locate Thurman's ideas and his ideological development within a false timeframe. Thurman's ideas were fully formed when James Cone pens the monumental work, *Black Theology Black Power* in 1969, and therefore, could not have been influenced by this work of Cone. However, Thurman cannot be excluded from the literature or discussions surrounding

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<sup>3</sup>The modern is defined here as the period from 1896 (conferring of the Ph.D. to W.E.B. DuBois) to 1975 (the end of the Vietnam War).

Black Theology. Within this literature, there is strategic use of Thurman's ideas such that many of the themes found in Cone and others seem foreshadowed by Thurman. The very notion of a theology, as described by Cone, written for powerless Black people constantly threatened by the insidious tentacles of White power is certainly more than congruent with Thurman's theological treatise dedicated to those who stand at a moment in time with their backs against the wall.<sup>4</sup> Beyond this, however, Gayraud Wilmore puts forth this comparison in *African American Religious Studies*, but also asserts what differentiates the two thinkers by noting that Cone "mounts a theological critique of the oppressors from the stance of power."<sup>5</sup>

Any notion of the fact that because the bulk of Thurman's writings preexisted the seminal texts concerning Black Theology somehow justifies their being ignored is fundamentally unsound. The aim of Thurman's work and the approach, specifically his privileging of his own Black experience as a significant starting point from which to create his ideas, certainly justifies his being included in this stream of thought. The Black experience, specifically the experience of oppression through segregation based on skin colour, "for the first twenty-three years of [his] life ... left deep scars in [his] spirit,"<sup>6</sup> causing his perception to be exceptionally keen to this separateness. Thurman writes further,

My roots are deep in the throbbing reality of the Negro idiom and from it I draw a full measure of inspiration and vitality ... There is no waking moment or sleeping interval when one may expect respite from the desolation and despair of segregation.<sup>7</sup>

As I wrote in my 2015 book, *Common Ground*, Thurman is philosophically describing what it means to "be" during this period. Also, as I was dealing with the subject of consciousness, no consciousness for Thurman existed outside of Blackness.

The best example of this foreshadowing of a Black Theology by Thurman is found within his work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, arguably his best-known work. In 1949, this work, which had begun as a 1935 seven-page essay ("Good News for the Underprivileged"), was first put into book form. Thurman's words announced his complete immersion into the task of finding a suitable response to the question of why would a Black person become a Christian given all that they had suffered at the hands of White people, is a question he was asked while in India. The response Thurman put forth was that the religion of Jesus was not an abstract myth; it was a religious movement, which developed in an historical context. In this context, the subject of the text was himself a member of the underprivileged, the disinherited. The principles that extended from this religious movement were not developed for the maintenance of power for the powerful, but it was aimed, instead, at relieving the struggle for life of the disinherited.

Thurman writes, "The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a techniques of survival for the oppressed."<sup>8</sup> In writing this, Thurman is attempting to recover that which has been lost by the coopting of Christianity by powerful oppressors. In a similar vein, Cone writes,

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<sup>4</sup>Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 11.

<sup>5</sup>Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies*, 35.

<sup>6</sup>Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, X.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 29.

The present work seeks to be revolutionary in the sense that it attempts to bring to theology a special attitude permeated with black consciousness. It asks the question, what does the Christian gospel have to say to powerless black [people] whose existence is threatened daily by the insidious tentacles of power?<sup>9</sup>

It is certainly evident by now that there is an intentional emphasis on comparing the works, although briefly, of Thurman and Cone as of means of demonstration Thurman's foreshadowing of Black Theology. This is certainly purposeful, for it is Cone's 1969 text that is considered to be the initial first, full volume text of Black Theology. To be sure, others write about expressions of Black religious belief, but it is Cone who attempts to use a theological framework, with complete theological categories, to outline a Black Theology. Therefore, any attempt to demonstrate Thurman as a forerunner to the very concept should most likely begin with Cone.

In *Prophesy Deliverance*, Cornel West deliberately constructs a historical outline demonstrating Thurman's presence as a forerunner to Cone, referring to Thurman, Benjamin Mays, and George Kelsey as being among the pioneers.<sup>10</sup> In a section of this work entitled, "The Evolution of Black Theology," West divides this development into four stages, extending from the middle of the seventeenth century until at least the time of the book's publication, which was 1982.<sup>11</sup> He locates Thurman in the second stage, from 1864 to 1969, which is designated "Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Institutional Racism."<sup>12</sup> To categorize Thurman in such a manner is to certainly say that the works of Thurman, as listed in the citations for this section are at least on par theologically, and are to be understood as representative works of a particular kind, that kind being works that lead to the development of Black Theology.

As a final point toward the demonstration of Thurman's position in relation to Black Theology, because of criticism received from other prominent Black theologians, Cone published *The Spirituals and the Blues*, as a means of allowing the voices of Black people to speak to the subject of a Black Theology. The first chapter is entitled, "Interpretations of the Black Spirituals," and includes a section, which investigates the subject of religion in the spirituals. Cone writes,

According to Thurman, the black spiritual is an expression of the slaves' determination to *be* in a society that seeks to destroy their personhood. It is an affirmation of the dignity of the black slaves, the essential humanity of their spirits. Where human life is regarded as property and death has no dignity, "the human spirit is stripped to the literal substance of itself."

Cones' only critique of Thurman's essay was the lack of a "full scope" theological analysis. To be fair to Thurman, however, this essay was an interpretation of what Black people themselves had to say about their humanity in light of their God and it was not filtered through Western theological categories. In spite of this critique, it is clear that Cone, West, and Wilmore place Thurman among those who are to be thought of as foundational thinkers on the subject of a Black Theology. Certainly, his writings were instrumental in framing their thoughts on the matter. It is only when subsequent writers of recent times are examined that Thurman and others of his milieu are sometimes overlooked.

<sup>9</sup>Cone, *Black Theology Black Power*, 32.

<sup>10</sup>West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 103–5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

Just as Thurman influenced Black Theology conceptually, in a like manner he was influenced by the writings of mystics, especially Neoplatonists, beginning with Plotinus, and forward in history, including others who lived during his lifetime.<sup>13</sup> It was in these writings, that Thurman found others, who like him, sought answers to the timeless problems of the human spirit. In a 1953 sermon, Thurman displayed the depth of his concern and focus upon the subject of mysticism through the expounding upon the ideas of others who were similarly situated throughout history. Of course it would have been impossible for Thurman to refer to all persons in this vein of thought that influenced him, so why these? It is my opinion that Thurman mentioned those whom he found a profound sense of connection in their ideas. Plotinus, however, stands out as being the most significant for Thurman. It is Plotinus' explanation of the God/existence relationship that Thurman uses to shape his thinking on the subject.

All mystics are not Neoplatonist, neither does Thurman attempt to graft the various concepts from all mystics into a philosophical whole. Thurman is intentional about the ideas he uses to ground his talks and writings. To this point, his use of Plotinus is significant for this reason, it opens a window of understanding to the inner workings of Thurman's ideas, while also providing a perspective of how he felt these ideas should be categorized. This process of thinking began in 1929, when Rufus Jones<sup>14</sup> accepted Thurman as a special student. Thurman increased his ability to express his ontology of mysticism. Between 14 May 1940 and July of 1971, Thurman would use Plotinus as integral part of his lectures and sermons. There are nine specific lessons in which he outlined Plotinus' ontology of mysticism while also demonstrated its pragmatic qualities.

In a sermon delivered 26 November 1961, from tape #6, "The Inward Journey" series entitled "Plotinus" (which Thurman wrote a meditative poem in *The Inward Journey* book entitled "Plotinus,") Thurman explicitly recounts the finer points of the philosophy of Plotinus.<sup>15</sup> In the following section, I shall detail those points and how they informed Thurman's thinking. What is necessary for placement here is Thurman's identification with a particular type of thought and his recognition that his experiences would act as a filter for that thought. So, even as he felt connected to a past lineage of thought, he also realize his uniqueness.

Unlike other mystics, Thurman's time of existence taught him that forced fragmentation in any form was not only a timeless problem of the human spirit, but it was a serious threat to the actualization of human potential. Thurman could recognize fragmentation as a problem because, as a mystic himself, he was certain of the interconnectedness of all things. However, just as the thinkers of Black Theology have utilized life experiences in their work, Thurman's philosophy was also infused with his experience in life. To this point, Thurman would say, "How can I believe that life has meaning if I do not believe that my own life has meaning?"<sup>16</sup> In other words, he would use his lived experience and the memes or cultural genes inherited from his experiential moment of the twentieth

<sup>13</sup>It is significant to those attempting to decipher the depths of Thurman's thought to know that he was not limited in his reading; however, as to theology, once being introduced to the writings of mystic philosophers, he became more focused in that area, reading such works as those written by Plato and the Neoplatonists to include Spinoza, Bergson, and Whitehead.

<sup>14</sup>Jones (1863–1948) was a Quaker mystic and philosophy professor at Haverford College.

<sup>15</sup>November 26, 1961, from tape #6, "The Inward Journey" series entitled "Plotinus."

<sup>16</sup>Thurman and Smith, *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings*, 14.

century as a post-slavery, post-Plessy v. Ferguson, Black American, to shape his perceptual framework.<sup>17</sup>

Thurman was concerned with the negative effects of fragmentation, but he also saw the necessity of informing individuals of their potential to overcome certain characteristics that obstruct becoming fully human such as fear, hate, and deception.<sup>18</sup> It was Thurman's desire to make known to his readers the inherent essence and ability of humanity. He believed that as humans, we choose! Certainly, he did not deny that particular moments in time contained definite deterministic structures that held sway in the life of the individual. However, he did not concede that these deterministic structures had the final approval in the overall outcome of the individual. For Thurman, it was a matter of commitment. About this, he would say,

Commitment means that it is possible for a man to yield the nerve center of his consent to a purpose or cause, a movement or ideal, which may be more important to him than whether he lives or dies. The commitment is a self-conscious act of will by which he affirms his identification with what he is committed to.<sup>19</sup>

In this statement, Thurman's recognition of the outward bounds of human existence are not as much ignored as they are superseded by the commitment or conscious intent of the individual will to first imagine a possibility, and then to become by overcoming the struggle of inner and outer obstacles. Contained within statements, such as this, is Thurman's attempt to do as others, such as Rufus Jones and Meister Eckhart have, and that was to make being a mystic, and to a greater degree, mysticism, understandable to the laymen and applicable to everyday life.<sup>20</sup>

An incredible effort was directed towards this goal of creating what was essentially a living philosophy rooted in his own lived experience, interpreted through the wisdom of the ages, and communicated through his writings and sermons. It was through the combination of these elements that Thurman could be seen as a prophet,<sup>21</sup> and not a disciple. About this he would say,

When I completed this manuscript, I was struck by the feeling that here I had set down the case in rather formal terms, for what reveals itself is my lifelong working paper. What is suggested and often stated in previous books, such as *The Creative Encounter*, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and *Footprints of a Dream*, in the present volume comes full circle in a wider context, rooted in the life process itself.<sup>22</sup>

The prophet/disciple distinction is one I find to be necessary, given the haste in which many who write about African American scholars assume them to be merely parroting some other great, typically White thinker. Thurman distinguishes himself from others whom he is often thought to be mimicking by his constant posing of the question,

<sup>17</sup>Neal, *Common Ground*, 1.

<sup>18</sup>Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 29.

<sup>19</sup>Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 17.

<sup>20</sup>Much of Thurman's focus was upon creating the possibility to actualize full potential for those with which he came into contact. Differing from other theologians and philosophers, his focus was not on conversion stemming from his in emanation or a latent divine spark.

<sup>21</sup>In Jones' book *George Fox, Seeker and Friend* (1930) Jones says of Fox, "He was always an affirmation mystic and must not be judged or estimated in the class of scholarly or critical reformers. He does not belong there. He belongs in the order of the mystical, or intuitional, prophets." Likewise, Luther Smith asserts of Thurman, "Holy Man, Saint, spiritual innovator, ... prophet ..." in *The Mystic as Prophet*.

<sup>22</sup>Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, xiii.



what is my life's meaning? In this query, there was enveloped the idea that Black life had meaning. This distinction is also present in his ability to recognize that God inhabits Black flesh making it also a part of the overall totality of reality. However, much of this great effort, of which I spoke earlier, was expended in acquiring and synthesizing knowledge. In the next section, I will explicate the philosophical ideas that Thurman found useful towards his goal of creating this living philosophy, one thoroughly grounded in philosophical mysticism.

## Mysticism and Mystics

Mysticism and mystic existence, while certainly sharing points of connectivity, are not to be equated, nor can either term be said to be, univocal. Mysticism, to differentiate from a mystic experience, has to do with an individual's or a community's, for that matter, posture towards a certain metaphysical comprehension. More specifically adherents to mysticism have a certain cosmological understanding about the universe or multiverse and the ontological relationship of the individual. Within mysticism, this relationship, whether understood to be transcendent or intense, is thought to have oneness or wholeness, being opposite to fragmentation, as its preeminent characteristic.<sup>23</sup> That stated, then, mysticism is just as much a way of explaining existence, or a metaphysical philosophy, as it is a belief about metaphysics.

Mysticism as a philosophy, belief, or subject about which to write, was not unusual in Thurman's day. There were individuals who adhered to mysticism whether as a belief or philosophy and there were many writings considered to have expounded upon this subject matter.<sup>24</sup> Uniqueness can be found in that Thurman held mainstream positions within academia while also placing mysticism at the centre of his teaching and writing; also he was a Black man. However, Thurman was able to find a like consciousness in many that were also seeking to explain what they believed to be the possibility of a direct connection to "The One." In written work, Thurman speaks prominently of his special study with Rufus Jones, but the ideas of others also appear in his writings, connecting Thurman to such intellectual traditions as Neoplatonism and Process. This type of eclectic retrieval of ideas demonstrates Thurman's ability to describe his mystic experience, and beyond that, he was also able to explicate mysticism as a philosophy. Fundamentally, for Thurman, existence was one. This concept and its interpretation gave Thurman ideological kinship with others.

The religious basis for such an interpretation of community is the affirmation, which to me is categorical, that the Mind of God realizes Itself in time, and that there are observable patterns or sequences in all creation. Thus God is thought of as Creator. From this point of view, all time-space manifestations, in short, all things, even existence itself, are regarded as the Mind of God coming to Itself in time and space.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Spinoza writes,

<sup>23</sup>Mystic philosophers profess the interconnectedness of all existence, although not in the dogmatic sense, but through resolve, not being to find any better explanation for the intensity of the feeling of connectedness, all the while continually searching.

<sup>24</sup>American Philosophy departments were not wholly consumed by the "linguistic turn" during the period of Thurman's education.

<sup>25</sup>Thurman, *Common Ground*, 5.



Therefore the intellect of God, in so far as it is conceived to constitute his essence, is in truth the cause of all things, both their essence and of their existence, a truth which seems to have been understood by those who have maintained that God's intellect, will and power are one and the same thing.<sup>26</sup>

As stated above Howard Thurman's initial understanding of mysticism as a philosophy was gained through special study with Rufus Jones, based upon the timeframe in which an explanation appeared in his writings.<sup>27</sup> In 1961, Thurman wrote the following about Jones,

I would like to acknowledge ... my indebtedness to him for so large a share in helping me to stake out the area of thought and the interpretation of experience which has been my concern for the past thirty years.<sup>28</sup>

In this quote, it can easily be discerned that Thurman considered his acquired learning from Jones to be a system or framework by which he could perform a type of phenomenology giving special attention to his ability to explain or interpret his mystical experience to others. Thurman also continued his study independently of Jones, constantly searching for a particular understanding that would give meaning to his life, while also serving as primer for the specific life questions that plagued his subjective reality. In October of 1934, he published a review of Mary Anita Ewer's *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism* in which he wrote,

... there is in the human soul that which Meister Eckhart calls an uncreated element. It is the point at which the infinite enters the finite, it is given, and it is not finite but infinite.<sup>29</sup>

Just as Thurman spent a great amount of time interpreting terse philosophical text into terms more palatable for the laymen, he also spent an equal amount of time translating his mystic experience, which this experiential presence is a requirement, for mystics. The mystic experience is comprised of the epistemological process by which those who are mystics come to their metaphysical knowledge. Of this, Thurman would write,

The mystic experiences unity, not identity, but it is a unity that penetrates through all the levels of consciousness and fills him with a sense of the Other. He uses symbolism to help him keep alive this sense of presence.<sup>30</sup>

Thurman's vocal and written explanation of this process is congruent with other mystics. A similar sentiment can be found in the writings of Pseudo Dionysius,

And so all these scriptural utterances celebrate the supreme Deity by describing it as a monad or henad, because of its supernatural simplicity and indivisible unity, by which unifying power we are led to unity ... But as for now, what happens is this. We use whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God. With these analogies we are raised upward toward the truth of the mind's vision, a truth that is simple and one.<sup>31</sup>

Plotinus has this to say,

<sup>26</sup>Spinoza, *The Ethics*, prop. XVII corol. 2 schol.

<sup>27</sup>Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 76–7.

<sup>28</sup>Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, 3.

<sup>29</sup>Fluker, *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*, 204.

<sup>30</sup>Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," 108–30.

<sup>31</sup>Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 51–3.

In our self-seeing there, the self is seen as belonging to that order, or rather we merged into that self in us who has the quality of that order. It is a knowing of the self-restored to its purity. No doubt we should speak of seeing; but we cannot help talking in dualities, seen and seer, instead of, boldly, that achievement of unity.<sup>32</sup>

These statements not only synonymous, but also clearly demonstrate the acuity of Thurman's explanative methods stemming from his total immersion and connectivity to a particular philosophical tradition. This was a tradition he felt would assist in the cause of community development and social transformation among all people, especially those who were considered to be, the disinherited.

Community development and personal transformation stimulated Thurman's early search for an understanding of the intense connection he felt to his existence. Thurman would describe the process by which the individual begins personal transformation by different modes. One such mode he used was called the centring moment or the process of centring down. Of this Thurman would say on one occasion,

... all my life I have been seeking to validate, beyond all ambivalences and frustrations, the integrity of inner life. I have sensed the urgency to find a way to act and react responsibly out of my own center. I have sought a way of life that could come under the influence of, and be informed by, the fruit of the inner life.<sup>33</sup>

Because Thurman was, from a young age, introspective, meditation, and deep observance were always a part of his constitution, but the centring down process, as so named, is a part of the Quaker tradition and was introduced to Thurman during his special session with Rufus Jones.<sup>34</sup> It would be in these moments of centring down that Thurman would feel the greatest intensity and interconnectedness to life; however, he would also realize, because of the intensity in these moments, that the feeling of connectedness found in these moments could not be maintained. The explanation given for the brevity of the experience rested upon the tension between the interconnectedness to the genus of life and the experiential moments found within the species of life.<sup>35</sup>

What Professor [William Ernest] Hocking has called the principle of alternation is in the very structure of all experience. The mystic discovers this in a most extraordinary fashion. He is a man, he is a part and parcel of all the world of nature, he has warring impulses within and participates in strife without. He sees that the world of things and men does not conform to the unity which he has experienced in his vision ... He finds that the two worlds must in some sense be one because he participates actively in both at the same moment but he is convinced that the meaning of the below is in the above.<sup>36</sup>

According to Thurman, there are obstacles found within the species of life, which dull the intensity or block the reception of the feeling of interconnectedness, thus hindering community development and personal transformation. The effect of this experience on some mystics is a strong desire towards isolation, but this is contrary to the premise of the interconnectedness to the genus of life and on some level it is necessarily unfulfilling. Another effect of this experience is a strong desire to challenge the obstacles of outer life,

<sup>32</sup>Plotinus, "Ennead 6[10]."

<sup>33</sup>Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, 4–5.

<sup>34</sup>Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 28.

<sup>35</sup>Thurman and Fluker, *A Strange Freedom*, 114.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

causing an evolution from the goal of personal transformation to the goal social transformation, with the realization that the inner acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of the genus of life must somehow be reflected in an outer interconnectedness of the species of life.

The pronouncement of the active participation in the mystic experience is found early in Thurman's life and clearly had an intense effect on him throughout his life. An indication of this participation is noted in Thurman's autobiographical work through several key statements about the substance of his understanding of the connection between a particular life and life in general.

Death was no stranger to us. It was a part of the rhythm of our days ... but I tender to wonder away to be alone for a time, for in that way I sense the strength of the quiet and the aliveness of the woods ... Nightfall was meaningful to my childhood, for the night was more than a companion ... The night had its own language ... At such times I could hear the night think, and feel the night feel ... The night has been my companion all my life ... The ocean and the river befriended me when I was a child ... Eventually, I discovered that the oak tree and I had a unique relationship ... I could talk to the oak tree aloud and know that I was understood ... As for me, on each visit I would go to my oak tree to lean against it for an intense moment of past intimacy.<sup>37</sup>

These demonstrate the interconnected and interdependent way in which Thurman thought. Howard Thurman, a person taken to be a mystic by even those who may deny the validity of the mystic experience, was consumed with the analysis of mysticism and its utility in providing answers for community development and social transformation. So, then, what was Howard Thurman's conception of mysticism and how did his iteration of spirituality qualify as a mystic philosophy? Also, what did Thurman perceive, as a result of mysticism, to be the nature of community? To bring clarity to this statement, Thurman's logic must be thoroughly analysed.

## Mysticism and Logic

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,"<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> Thurman's writings have been relegated to serving as

<sup>37</sup>Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 4–28.

<sup>38</sup>Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, 1–30.

<sup>39</sup>The description of Howard Thurman as philosopher, among other descriptors, can be found on the back cover of several of his books.

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 dialogues 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 U.S.A.<sup>40</sup> However, Thurman continues to exist 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 auto-ethnography, 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 a part of a harmonious whole. If individuals are to 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 metaphysics.

Thurman wrote 20 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 central tenets, as outlined previously put forth a monist cosmology, while also interlaced with a mythical explanation of the relationship between humanity and all other existence. Grounded in these mythical precepts, Thurman's ideas not only document his familiarity with the Neoplatonic canon, but he demonstrates a clear intent to substantiate his claims through the best of these ideas.

In particular, the writings of Plotinus do much to evince Thurman's understanding. Certainly, there is not an attempt here to in anyway to proffer an assertion that Thurman was trying to present his work as an explication of Plotinus. Rather, the contention, here, is simply that the logic which informed Thurman's writings was at its core, Neoplatonic. Basically, a more thorough understanding of his writings can be gained through a close reading of Plotinus, specifically, and other Neoplatonists, in general. However, the fact that the following examples sound alike is no guarantee that they mean the same contextually, but what is significant is the fact that Thurman believes himself to be saying something very similar.

Included among Thurman's many meditations is a meditation entitled, "Plotinus," which summarizes the fundamental concepts, as Thurman understood them. These concepts also form a thread of sorts woven securely into Thurman's many writings.

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<sup>40</sup>Neal, *Common Ground*, 60–1.

The world, the cosmos, my little life, are contained in God, and if I keep the roadway open, even as I live, doing my thing in the world of things, I can keep journeying back home to be recentered, renewed, recreated, redeemed, over and over and over again, as long as I live and beyond.<sup>41</sup>

The above quote is but the first line of the aforementioned meditation and in this it can be clearly seen that Thurman does not just understand the mystic tradition, but also makes use of it by way of practice through meditations and prayers. Oneness of everything, the ability to directly experience this oneness, and the continuation of life, are all concisely exhibited concepts. An examination of Plotinus' *Ennead* VI.9 shows the correlation between these two mystics separated by centuries.

All beings are beings by "The One," is how the treatise begins. Metaphysics being the focal point of the treatise, Plotinus puts forth an ontological framework that is enveloped in his cosmology. Unity is at the core of existence, and by contradistinction, non-unity necessarily means nonexistence. How this statement can logically make sense above more than mere conjecture is made clear through the use of the dialectic, which Plotinus makes elucidates in his treatise by the same title,

It puts an end to error in sense knowledge by establishing itself in the intelligible realm. It concentrates its whole attention there, and after having left deception behind it allows the soul, as Plato says, to feed in the "meadows of truth." ... It alternates between synthesis and analysis until it has gone through the entire domain of the intelligible and has arrived at the principle.<sup>42</sup>

So, the question is asked, "What then is The One? What is its nature?" (VI.9(3)). The question is sequestered rather than directly answered in this statement, "The One is the foundation of all other things and gives them, at one and the time, existence and location; what needs locating is not self-sufficing" (VI.9(6)). This gives grounding to Thurman's concept of existence itself, existing in the "Mind of God," with God being equated to "The One." Thurman admits to the frailty of this connection because of the tendency to anthropomorphize the nature of God; however, the connection is sufficient in that it provides the ability to begin the conceptual process leading toward the ability to directly experience this oneness.

Plotinus addresses the beginning of the conceptual process as such, "when the soul seeks to know in its own way – by coalescence and unification – it is prevented by that very unification from recognizing it has found 'The One,' for it is unable to distinguish knower and known" (VI.9(3)).

Accordingly, the soul cannot cease from the search for "The One," and Plotinus describes the necessary steps to move the desired aim ("The One") as a withdrawal from sense perception, turning towards the things the Apostle Paul calls "things on high." Only through this method can The One be contemplated by the giving way to what Thurman calls the "God Vision." This God Vision allows one to see as the God, but in the finite, however, also giving the ability to directly experience this oneness, which causes unspeakable joy. The God Vision is finite only in that it is particular to the ability to have the vision, which from the one is not finite. If it were finite, then the "The One" would be finite. This speaks to Thurman's notion of the continuation of life.

<sup>41</sup>Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*, 23.

<sup>42</sup>Plotinus, "*Ennead* [I.3(4)]."

As stated earlier, there are two works, in particular, which layout the central tenets of Thurman's ideas while also applying these ideas to Thurman's humanistic concerns. The first of the two, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, details in five chapters, Thurman's understanding of the human experience.<sup>43</sup> While doing so, Thurman also describes his cosmology. For Thurman, this is a living world, there is also commonality stemming from the agent of life, and this agent is also alive. This agent, which has its origin in God, is expressed in all things that are living. This premise is 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 from a desire towards 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 writings could be read as if they were one extended work with the aforementioned title providing the conclusion to the collection.<sup>44</sup> Focusing on the proposition that a common ground of existence subsists and is what causes the interconnectedness between all things, especially that which is living, Thurman puts forth the corollary idea that not only is it good for this connection to guide our political and social behaviour but not doing so is detrimental to our continued existence. This idea of interconnectedness is also a result of Thurman's belief that the pinnacle of human existence is in human community, as such, then, it is necessarily implied, through the humanistic focus of Thurman's oeuvre, that the height of living existence is also found in human community. Therefore, it can be inferred, that it is counter to the aim of life for that which resides at the highest tier of life (human community or humans in community) to also be destructive to life (i.e. war). Simply put, the highest tier should stand the best possibility for the continuation of life and the realization of the God vision (which is simply to see as God sees), which is a given, if the goal of unity is to actualize full potential.

Here in lies the conflict that drives what is called social mysticism<sup>45</sup> and turns the aim of Thurman's philosophical theology toward his lived experience of social oppression. Specifically, this conflict consisted of the appearance of an existential absence of possibilities, understood to be oppression, serving a purpose of denying the ability of certain groups (the oppressed) to actualize their fullest possibilities in life.

In other words, the presence of oppression restricts potential. Understood in this fashion, then, the necessary implied conclusion is that humans have more possibilities in community and the better and more open a community is, the more possibilities its members have. Therefore, whenever an individual or group within a larger community of groups is intent upon denying this type of freedom to another group then it can be said that the initial group denying freedom also denies its members the possibility of reaching full potential. Essentially, to decrease or deny possibility is to promote death.

<sup>43</sup>Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 17–21.

<sup>44</sup>Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, xiii.

<sup>45</sup>Social Mysticism is the name given to Thurman's conception of applied affirmative mysticism, which owing to the realization of the effect of social ills on the ability of the mystic to have the mystic experience becomes cognizant of the need for social action. Thurman sought to perform social action by creating communal space for the realization of the mystic experience.

Although Thurman was not intent upon creating a system of philosophy or systematic theology, he was systematic in the way in which he approached his process of ratiocination. Thurman saw a necessity in first delineating his metaphysical conception in order that the conclusion he was to put forth, concerning human experience, could be shown to have validity because it was formed from the very nature of being. He begins his delineation by intimating that he is indeed a mystic, from there he expounds upon the aim of the mystic, which he indicates as being God. God, for Thurman, is central to his perceptual framework; through this framework he propagates God as being indefinable, but there are two knowable essential qualities of God, which are life and mind. Thurman explains in this manner, "... wherever life is found, evidence of creative intent must also exist in that which is being experienced, reacted to, observed, or studied."<sup>46</sup> The significance of knowing these essential qualities is that they bring to the fore the interconnected nature of existence.

Development of this metaphysical position, by Thurman, was a consequence of his immersion in mysticism, to be sure. The writings of pantheistic/panentheistic thinkers, such as Spinoza and Whitehead to be specific, however, were also a great influence. When Thurman offered an epistemic means of discovering the necessity of community, he wrote, "... the experience of community, or realized potential, is rooted in life itself because the 'intuitive' human urge for community reflects a characteristic of all life."<sup>47</sup>

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza wrote, "It is the knowledge of the second (reason) and third (intuition), and not the first kind (opinion or imagination), which teaches us to distinguish the true from the false."<sup>48</sup> The intent at this point, of course, is not to offer proof of the validity of Spinoza's thoughts concerning this discourse, but simply to suggest that Thurman was certainly aware of its existence. Along a similar progression of thought, Alfred North Whitehead states,

We sit for hours the same chair, in the same house, with the same animal body. The dimensions of the room are defined by its spatial relations. There are colors, sounds, scents, partly abiding and partly changing. also the major facts of change are defined by locomotion of the animal bodies and of the inorganic furniture. Within this general concept of nature, there have somehow to be interwoven the further concepts of Life and Mind.<sup>49</sup>

To understand this notion of Whitehead's, what is needed is attention to Henri Bergson, a major influence in his thinking. In Bergson's work, *Creative Evolution*, he intimates the conflation of the concepts life and consciousness by the statement, "life is consciousness launched into mind."<sup>50</sup> Thurman's benefit through these discourses and others can be easily noticed as he prefers to put forth a rationalization of his concept of metaphysics as opposed to being dismissive of or basing his concepts upon an emotive understanding.

In an effort to thoroughly explicate Thurman's system, an understanding must be gained concerning the meaning of mystical logic. As stated previously, mysticism and

<sup>46</sup>Thurman, *Common Ground*, 7. Thurman explains in detail his thought on the matter on pages 4–7 and also previews his thinking in *Disciplines of the Spirit*, on pages 14–7. Similar ideas are found in works in which Thurman was certainly familiar, such as Alfred North Whitehead's *Modes of Thought*, 129, and Spinoza's *Ethics* (ed.) Wild *Ethics*, Part II. props 1 and 2.

<sup>47</sup>Thurman, *Common Ground*, 5.

<sup>48</sup>Spinoza, *The Ethics*, 187.

<sup>49</sup>Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 129.

<sup>50</sup>Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 165–76.



logic, as ways of knowing, are seldom discussed together. Much of the explanation can be found in the disparity between the means by which conclusions are reached in each way of knowing. Logic is defined as the art of reason (rationality), as such, it lays hold upon the facility of reason as its method, while mysticism, or spiritual intuition, has adopted intuition (sometimes thought of as instinct).<sup>51</sup> In western culture, reason is taken to be superior, and it is assumed intuition is devoid of reason and does not lead to a credible truth. If the writings of Benedict Spinoza along with Henri Bergson are given consideration, however, then it is possible to clear away much of the disparity between these alternate ways of knowing. Thurman accepts the premise put forth by T.H. Hughes, based on the writings of Spinoza and Bergson, which identifies knowledge as not possible without reason; however, intuition is not devoid of reason.<sup>52</sup>

## Epistemology

The epistemological structure upon which Thurman's logical framework is constructed accepts intuition as a way of knowing not unlike deduction or rationality in that it also depends upon reason. However, in order to make this claim, it becomes necessary to delineate this understanding of intuition by means of exposing historical sources. In doing so, I find it valuable to note that Thurman's perceptual framework was shaped primarily by his view of nature, his grandmother, and his experience of Blackness, through which he read all of his philosophical and theological studies. It is this perceptual framework that formed the impetus for Thurman's ability to accept or reject many of the writers he would read. Thurman's method of accrediting useful texts for the explication of his philosophical theology was a causal factor in his alignment to those thinkers whose writings identified them as mystics, given that their ideas were grounded in the claim of the oneness of being.

Thurman's perceptual framework is evidenced through the verbal indicators found enveloped within many of his books, however, even recorded in small quantity, the same determination is easily discernible. In *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Thurman's proclaiming of the continuity of existence between God and the created being is done in order to make the point that all humans, by virtue of being created by God, are beings of value.

This idea – that God is mindful of the individual – is of tremendous import in dealing with fear as a disease. In this world the socially disadvantaged man is constantly given a negative answer to the most important personal questions upon which mental health depends: “Who am I? What am I?”<sup>53</sup>

In writing this statement, Thurman harkens back to his 1955 publication taken from the “Ingersol Lecture” given in 1947, entitled *Deep River*, where he begins by asserting the importance of the antebellum Negro preacher, whose ministry was built upon the foundational premise that “every human being was a child of God.” In combination with the earlier quote, it is not difficult to discern if one has indeed read Thurman's oeuvre, the connective tissue in these statements is to be found in the characterization of his grandmother's hermeneutical quip concerning her refusal to hear any of the letters of Paul

<sup>51</sup>Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, 1–30.

<sup>52</sup>Hughes, *Philosophical Basis of Mysticism*, 110–27.

<sup>53</sup>Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 49.

read by the young Thurman. When pressed about this refusal, she focused his attention to her enslavement, offering from her memory, "... if freedom ever came and I learned to read, I would never read from that part of the Bible!"<sup>54</sup> The significance of this statement is found in Thurman's notion of the interconnectedness of all things giving justification to the rejection of any proposition that subverts this notion, regardless of the source.

The claim that being is one, and thus interconnected, is epistemologically rooted in the validity of intuition. Attempts to validate intuition's ability to reveal truth has been well documented in the history of philosophy. Through Thurman's writings, an investigation of his philosophical analyses of mysticism revealed that his thoughts concerning mysticism, specifically intuition, explored many sources, including Greek Philosophy, among others, but came to depend on the writings of three philosophers in particular: Spinoza, Bergson, and T. Hywel Hughes. Whitehead's writings are important, also, but to a much lesser degree.

Spinoza's writings on the subject prove to be foundational for Thurman. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes that the three ways of knowing are Imagination, Reason, and Intuitive Science. Imagination, for Spinoza, is based upon experiences, which are corrupted, confused, and lack interpretation through the lens of knowledge. Therefore, Spinoza rejects imagination as a way of attaining truth. However, reason and intuition are found by Spinoza to be acceptable owing to the rationalizing process found present in each. The basis for Spinoza's acceptance of intuition as a way of knowing can be found in the understanding of his rejection of the Cartesian *dubito*, which separates the substance of the mind from the physical substances of matter, essentially creating a disconnect between thinking substance and physical substance. For Spinoza, this concept was entirely wrongheaded, given that to accept such a proposition would create an inability for these two substances to have any knowledge of the other. For Spinoza, there is only one substance. Thurman agreed with this notion and expanded upon it, as he found necessary, which includes his explication of life as living.

T. Hywel Hughes' chapter on kinds of knowledge substantially explores the variations in meaning pertaining to knowledge, while focusing upon the two descriptions of knowledge, which appear the most in the writings of major thinkers on the matter. After delineating a number of different historical ideas concerning what counts as knowledge, and also distinguishing specific characteristics of each form, Hughes' focus is upon the incomplete scope of knowledge created by giving preeminence to reason over any other form. Substantial dependence is placed upon the account given by Bergson, which aims to incorporate the science of evolution into any metaphysical understanding of knowledge. Hughes finds this discourse necessary, as his total desired result is nothing less than to give credence to mysticism through an identification of the flaws that arise from the attempts of others to equate reason (the presumed legitimate path to knowledge), as the means for validating the nonexistence of God. Hughes does take issue with the dichotomization of reasoning and intuition by Bergson. In placing each way of knowing polar to the other, Bergson has made "too deep and radical a cleavage"<sup>55</sup> between the two. According to Hughes, intuition is not a way of knowing opposed to reason, but a comprehensive way

<sup>54</sup>Thurman, *Deep River*, 17.

<sup>55</sup>Hughes, *Philosophical Basis of Mysticism*, 117.

of knowing inclusive of reason. About this, Hughes would say, “In all knowledge, some of the forms and processes of reason are operative.”<sup>56</sup>

Hughes further exposes the meaning of intuition by removing all cleavages and flattening points of ambiguity until further light is shone upon the matter, all the while reshaping and possibly recreating the notion of what it means to know reality. By definition, the concept of reason is a delimiting factor, including as known, only those things that can be proven based on the skill-set of the knower (based upon laws and logical inferences). This, as a corollary, is also dependent on the horizon of their existence. However, intuition, not being dependent on the faculties of reason alone, combines the skill-set of the knower along with all of that which the knower is composed, inclusive of feeling and emotional states, to provide for a more instinctual basis from which to know. Hughes uses a term from psychology, feeling-continuum, to better describe what exactly is meant by intuitive knowledge. He uses the following the analogy,

Before the child the is conscious of self as distinct from its environment, there is the consciousness of organic sensation and needs, at first a sense of discomfort and of change in its environment, together with a vague feeling of organic needs.

This analogy further exemplifies Hughes’ premise that knowing as a result of intuition is not exclusive of reason. Neither is it solely dependent upon reason either. Rather, it makes space for the knower’s perception to be based on the totality of stimuli and the thinking process, rather than only the thinking process, jettisoning any stimuli not concluded through reason.

### **Mystical Logic of Cosmic Unity**

According to Thurman’s mystical logic of an intuitionally perceived cosmic unity, the potentiality bound within life is only realized through an understanding of the interrelatedness of being. Therefore, to deny this realization of potential is to maintain an incomplete status. About this, Thurman writes,

In the total panorama of the external world of nature, there seems to be a pattern of structural dependability and continuity, or what may be called an inner logic, that manifests itself in forms, organizational schemes, and in a wide variety of time-space arrangements.<sup>57</sup>

This is because, as stated earlier, Thurman assumes life to be alive with a conscious intent, and the conscious intent is that it (life) continues. Life seeks life. Life seeks to be whole. In this sense, to be whole ultimately means to realize whole existence in God, which as Thurman understands, can be equivocated with God. At this moment of intuitional realization, the “Creative Encounter,” as Thurman calls it, a new perceptual framework is created. Thurman refers to this as opening of the door that can never be shut. The response of the individual to this vision of possibilities by means of participation in the possibilities is to have communion with God. It is the moment of making the lived experience and the desired experience one.

Fundamentally, to make the lived experience and the desired experience unite is essentially the foundation of all Thurman’s thinking and writings. We must remain

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Thurman, *Common Ground*, 4–7 (5).

cognizant, however, that the desired experience, that of unity or oneness, emanates from God. This unity or oneness does not imply singleness of vision, experience, or creative action, but multiplicity should instead be substituted in conjunction with singleness of aim, which is the good also perceived as love. Ultimately, to reach this moment, for Thurman, is to exist at the highest level of being or quite literally to be free. The achievement of this moment, however, is contingent, relying upon several factors most important of which is the elevating of the consciousness or the disciplining of the individual spirit.

In the work entitled, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, the five aspects of the human experience focused upon by Thurman were chosen because of their ability to tutor the human spirit.<sup>58</sup> Mysticism as an experience and a way of being in the world is explored in great detail in a 1939 lecture series given at Eden Theological Seminary at St. Louis, Mo.<sup>59</sup> The emphasis, here, being upon Thurman's mystical logic of cosmic unity, the first of these five aspects becomes central to our present discussion. Thurman sees commitment as similar to what other philosophers have termed intentionality. Commitment is characterized as being basic to life and, therefore, not foreign to each living being, enabling all beings to benefit from the inherent capacity to commit on some level. It is neither a positive or negative capacity, and benefits any aim equally; however, those aims that are supportive of life, are in turn, supported by life. This support given by life is demonstrative of Thurman's mystical logic of cosmic unity, in that it allows the committed being to experience the responsiveness of the universe to this intentionality, such that life as experienced is oneness with the committed aim.

## Logical Framework for Thurman's Argument

- (1) Creation exists in the mind of God therefore existence is whole or one.
- (2) Existing in the mind of God causes the interconnectivity of all things.
- (3) Life emanates from the mind of God and as such, this is a living world.
- (4) Life is also alive, and as expressions of life we, too, are alive.
- (5) Within life exists the foundation of the connection to the mind of God.
- (6) Humans also exist in the mind of God and reflect the consciousness (intent) and creativity (possibility) of the mind of God.
- (7) Through consciousness, humans realize, owing to intuition, an internal connection to an existence beyond themselves.

Thurman concluded that in order to actualize our greatest possibility, whether as an individual or community, we must realize our internal nature in the external world.

About this Thurman writes,

If life has been fashioned out of a fundamental unity and ground, and if it has developed within such a structure, then it is not to be wondered that the interest in and concern for wholeness should be part of the conscious intent of life, more basic than any particular conscious tendency toward fragmentation. Every expression of life is trying to experience itself.

<sup>58</sup>Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 9.

<sup>59</sup>Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," 108–23.

For a form of life to experience itself it must actualize its unique potential. In so doing it experiences in miniature the fundamental unity out of which it comes.<sup>60</sup>

Arising from the aforementioned, one can assert that, for Thurman, following is of fundamental import, namely:

a = life has been fashioned out of fundamental unity and ground

b = life has developed within such a structure

c = it is not to be wondered that the interest in and concern for wholeness should be part of the conscious intent of life, more basic than any particular conscious tendency toward fragmentation.

This paper has demonstrated the means by which Thurman's work across the course of his long life contains intellectual riches that can assist the generative development Black Theology. While Thurman's articulation of the human condition predates formal development of Black Theology there is no doubting the prescience of much of his writing that prefigures the later continuing debates on the task of Black bodies as they seek to reclaim their humanity.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>60</sup>Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 17–21.

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