

A Call for More Culturally Responsive Reading of Texts: Jamesian Reading of Howard Thurman's New Testament Spirituality

Eunil David Cho, PhD

Assistant Professor of Spiritual Care and Counseling
Boston University School of Theology

Introduction

It is my great honor to respond to Shively Smith's important article that explores Howard Thurman's New Testament spirituality as a preacher and exegete and its implications for preaching and teaching. Although I am not a homiletician, I approach this conversation as a fellow practical theologian. I engage narrative theories to closely examine how individuals and communities construct stories to interpret and give meaning to their lived experiences within their cultural contexts. In this brief response, as a pastoral theologian who engages psychology as a primary conversation partner, I examine Thurman's New Testament spirituality through the lens of William James in his highly influential work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, as Jamesian psychology of religion offers insights on personal religious experience and mysticism to understand how Thurman's spirituality is shaped by his lived experience. Then, I conclude by arguing that the essence of Thurman's New Testament spirituality lies in his application of what New Testament scholar Brian Blount terms "culturally responsive or sensitive reading" of Jesus's teachings, practices, and religious framework.¹

Understanding Thurman's Spirituality Through James

In summary of Smith's exploration of Thurman's New Testament spirituality, for Thurman, spirituality is principally a "dynamic and ever-unfolding quest" for "what is ultimate presence, God, divine, transcendent, or meaningful."² Thurman's understanding of spirituality is closely aligned with William James' definition of religious experience written in James' monumental text, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where James defines religious experience as "*the feelings, acts and experiences of individuals in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to what-ever they may consider divine.*"³ Likewise, Thurman understands that spirituality begins with "the conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God."⁴ As they explore human spirituality through the lens of religious experience, Thurman and James both intentionally exclude the influence of doctrinal theology and religious institutions, choosing to pay more attention to direct and immediate "religious experiences" and focus on how ordinary individuals, particularly those with "their backs against the walls" encounter God or the divine alone in powerful and mysterious ways.⁵ For Thurman, these individuals would be "the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed,"⁶ and for James, these would be people with "sick souls."⁷

¹ Brian Blount, "The Souls of Biblical Folks and the Potential for Meaning," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 1 (2019): 6-21.

² From Shively Smith's paper.

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), 31 (italics original).

⁴ Luther Smith, *The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1991), 76.

⁵ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1996), 1.

⁶ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

⁷ In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James writes about "the Sick Soul" in Lectures VI and VII and describes how people who experience suffering and evil in their lives are more likely to have more powerful religious experiences and gain greater insight into the human condition.

While Thurman and James would agree that churches, theologies, creeds, traditions, and institutions are significant vehicles for passing on insights gained by religious experience, they claim that people's spirituality can be *first* found in what they think, what they feel, and how they make sense of their first-hand, subjective religious experiences that defy exact explanation. It means one's religious experience is often incapable of being described and must be directly experienced to be understood, which explains why Thurman and James were both very interested in mysticism. James defines mysticism as follows, "In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness."⁸ He further clarifies that there's something about "mystical experiences" in many religious traditions that require individuals to pause, think, and reflect. Similarly, Thurman states in his sermon collection, *Temptations of Jesus*, "In the total religious experience, we learn how to wait; we learn how to ready the mind and the spirit...I work at preparing my mind, my spirit for the moment when God comes to Himself in me. When it happens, I experience His presence."⁹ Why are there such parallels between these two thinkers, namely their strong interest in personal religious experience? In his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, Thurman writes that he studied James' work in college,¹⁰ and specifically references James directly in *The Creative Encounter*.¹¹ Another unknown connection between the two is W.E.B. Du Bois. Religious historian Amanda Brown, who wrote about Thurman's Fellowship Church, expounds that as a student and an intellectual collaborator of James at Harvard, Du Bois developed his thoughts on pragmatism and theories on race and identity, namely "double consciousness," which explains how Thurman undoubtedly inherited pragmatist and pluralistic thinking from James by way of Du Bois.¹²

Thurman's New Testament Spirituality: Situated Reading of Biblical Texts

However, Smith claims that Thurman's spirituality, especially his New Testament spirituality, goes beyond what James does because they came from different time periods and racial and socioeconomic contexts. Born in 1842, James was the first son of Henry James Sr., a Swedenborgian theologian from an intellectually elite family.¹³ Raised in a wealthy environment, James received a trans-Atlantic education both in Europe and America, becoming fluent in German and French. He initially aspired to study art and become a painter but ultimately attended Harvard Medical School to become a physician.¹⁴ When James died in 1910, Thurman was a ten-year-old Black child growing up in deep poverty in the segregated South. Since childhood, Thurman grappled with the stark reality of having his "back against the wall." In his challenging quest for experiencing oneness with the divine, Thurman came to realize and understand the Bible as "an authorized, canonized set of writings makes it inherently ideological and potentially harmful for colonized peoples, especially people of African descent," as Smith

⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 419.

⁹ Luther E. Smith, Jr. ed., *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis: 2006), 45-46.

¹⁰ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt & Brace, 1979), 44.

¹¹ Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1972), 20.

¹² Amanda Brown, *The Fellowship Church: Howard Thurman and the Twentieth-Century Religious Left* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 18-64.

¹³ American-British author Henry James (1843-1916) was William's younger brother.

¹⁴ In his young adulthood, James struggled for years with various physical illnesses and mental health challenges, including depression, which led him to contemplate suicide for months. These challenges are considered important reasons for his deep interest in religion as a source of healing and meaning in the face of adversity.

said.¹⁵ In his interpretation of the New Testament, or the “people in the NT world,”¹⁶ Thurman appears to engage in what New Testament scholar Brian Blount’s vision of “situated” and “culturally responsive” reading. This approach focuses on interpreting “Jesus, his teachings, and practices within their contextual framework” in the New Testament. For Thurman, this culturally responsive reading enabled him to reinterpret Jesus as “the disinherited Jew and a marginalized non-citizen under Roman imperial power,” which allowed him to reimagine how Jesus as “the disinherited Jew” would resonate with him and his communities during the time of racial segregation in America. Blount calls this “reading from an Other’s space” and argues that “reading from an other’s space transforms not only how one reads but how one lives.”¹⁷ In other words, interpreting Jesus as “the disinherited” empowered Thurman to raise the issues of power, discrimination, and injustice on the basis of race, religion, gender, or national origin, challenging his readers and listeners to stand in solidarity with fellow “disinherited” siblings in America *and* across the globe in their quest to find and experience “oneness” with the divine.

This approach to situated reading clearly distinguishes Thurman’s spirituality from James’ understanding of religious experience and spirituality. In *The Varieties*, James offers psychological examination of human nature by describing and interpreting numerous religious individuals’ personal accounts. However, James does not engage in culturally responsive exegesis when interpreting these personal religious accounts, neglecting to reflect critically on people’s cultural contexts or consider stories from their points of view. As a European American, James, due to his situatedness, was shielded from grappling with questions of systemic challenges, such as racial injustice, power dynamics, and cultural disparities. In contrast, Thurman, growing up and residing in a homeland that treats him as “a problem, an outcast, and a stranger,” was compelled to wrestle with his lived experience of inhabiting the “American wilderness” constantly.¹⁸ As a result, Thurman’s contextually situated reading leads him to interpret Jesus as “the disinherited,” inspiring him to embrace and practice “the religion of Jesus,” distinct from mainstream American Christianity. Therefore, Smith’s analysis of Thurman’s preaching and teaching reveals that this “culturally responsive and sensitive” reading of the Bible, advocated by Blount, pertinently encapsulates the essence of Thurman’s New Testament spirituality.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by posing a lingering question for Smith and all of us: How do we perceive Thurman as an exegete, especially when most recognize him primarily as a theologian or preacher? Why don’t people normally consider him as an exegete of biblical texts? My response to this question draws on the insight of Schüssler Fiorenza, who contends that “culturally responsive or sensitive” interpretations of sacred texts are undervalued in the North American theological academy that still prioritizes “value and context-free scientific interpretation.”¹⁹ Within this framework, Thurman may not be recognized as “an exegete” because his deeply contextual reading of Jesus and the Bible does not align with the perceived

¹⁵ From Smith’s paper.

¹⁶ From Smith’s paper.

¹⁷ Blount, “The Souls of Biblical Folks and the Potential for Meaning,” 9.

¹⁸ Fannie Lou Hamer, a formidable leader during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, often refers to the experience of African Americans as “wilderness.” See Karen D. Crozier, *Fannie Lou Hamer’s Revolutionary Practical Theology: Racial and Environmental Justice Concerns* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 8.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988): 3–17.

requirements of being scientifically or philosophically sophisticated. Similarly, in my field of pastoral theology and spiritual care, interpreting the texts of the living human document continues to stand as the central task.²⁰ Yet, we still struggle to fully embrace and practice culturally sensitive readings of human texts or narratives for the purpose of care. Moreover, unfortunately, ongoing resistance within the broader theological academy still persists toward contextual and cultural hermeneutics.

As theological scholars, educators, and practitioners, it is imperative that we persistently challenge the enduring resistance to the situated and contextual reading of biblical, human, and cultural texts in theological schools and faith communities. By drawing insights from New Testament hermeneutics and Thurman's writing, Smith guides us to understand how Thurman's contextual interpretation of the New Testament was pivotal in nurturing his mystic spirituality and informing his practice of contemplative preaching. Alongside Blount and Schüssler Fiorenza, by reconsidering Thurman as an exegete, Smith illustrates the profound impact such interpretations can have, not only on individuals but also on catalyzing transformative changes within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. I am convinced that Smith's interdisciplinary analysis and wisdom are crucial for advancing scholarly and ministerial conversations on both Black contemplative preaching and Thurman's mysticism and spirituality.

²⁰ Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).