

Response to La Ronda Barnes, “A Particular Oneing: Zilpha Elaw as a Model for a 21st Century Womanist Contemplative Homiletic”

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I was grateful to have been invited to Boston University School of Theology's consultation on “Spirituality, Preaching, and Bridging Racial Divides: Exploring Black Contemplative Preaching” with colleagues whose work I have long admired. And I was especially glad to have the opportunity to respond to La Ronda Barnes's excellent paper, “A Particular Oneing: Zilpha Elaw as a Model for a 21st Century Womanist Contemplative Homiletic.” La Ronda had been a student in my seminar on Christian contemplative prayer at Harvard Divinity School, and the scholarly seriousness and spiritual depth she brought to our work together elevated the class. She is a generous listener, a careful and critical reader, and a writer who is attentive to the relationship between our interior lives and our life together. Her paper, outlining the contours of what she calls a Womanist Contemplative Homiletic, reflects the very heart of her scholarly and existential concerns. It was an honor to be invited to make a response to it.

In an essay published after his death in 1968 called “Contemplation in a World of Action,” the Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton asked, “What does the contemplative life or the life of prayer, solitude, silence, meditation, mean in the atomic age? What can it mean? Has it lost all meaning whatever?”¹

The force of Merton's question remains undiminished in our day, which remains an atomic age, among many other things. Our consultation, held on October 15-17, 2023, came at the end of a week that saw civilians—families, children, the elderly—murdered and kidnapped in the Hamas attack on Israel. And we were standing at the beginning of a week in which Israel's military response was already having dire and fatal consequences for civilians—families, children, and the elderly. What can the contemplative dimension of religion mean in such a moment? Is it the opposite of action? Is it a way to avoid engagement with realities that are too painful to imagine and too complicated to address? Is contemplation the “prayers” in “thoughts and prayers”? Does contemplation have any meaning in a time of crisis, when the challenges are so urgent, when there is so much at stake?

I understood La Ronda to be saying that the contemplative—whether we're talking about contemplative prayer, a contemplative homiletic, or a contemplative way of living—is not a practice of avoidance but a matter of life and death, for individuals and for communities alike.

La Ronda argued for contemplative homiletics as a practice that enables survival, especially for those, as Howard Thurman puts it, “with their backs against the wall.”² She further insisted that contemplative homiletics nurtures our ability to cross the racial, gender, and class divisions that structure our society, warp our understanding of ourselves and others, and do real damage to real people. Particularity and interiority are the keys to La Ronda's understanding of contemplative homiletics, and she turned first to Zilpha Elaw to explore these themes. Crossing boundaries and divisions was central to Zilpha Elaw's ministry—she understood God to be

¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action: Second Edition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 154.

² Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), xxvii.

calling her to pray with and preach to the poor and the rich, Black and white, the enslaved and the enslavers. She crossed the ocean to pursue her calling and, at great risk to herself, crossed into states where she feared being arrested and enslaved.

La Ronda argues that Zilpha Elaw's boundary crossing was grounded not in the erasure of particularity but in the embrace of it, not in the emptying of self but in nurturing a presence to oneself without which genuine presence to others is impossible. It is from our particularity, our specificity, our difference La Ronda insisted, that we connect to God and to one another.

Zilpha Elaw's attention to particularity not only shaped her preaching but undergirded her analysis of white supremacy. She described with crystalline clarity how white skin is regarded as "a bauble of great value" by those who "readily sacrifice their intelligence to their prejudices and possess more knowledge than wisdom."³ The boundaries Zilpha Elaw felt called to cross and did cross were often policed by the violence to which this view of whiteness gave rise.

I understood La Ronda to be saying that Zilpha Elaw's contemplative attention to the particular, both within herself and outside herself, was a form of resistance to that violence. It allowed her, as La Ronda puts it, to "discern her call and navigate hostile terrains." For Zilpha Elaw, being Black and being a woman mattered. These dimensions of her particularity rendered her vulnerable in almost every situation, but they also rendered her open to the life of the spirit. I was reminded in reading this part of La Ronda's paper of the twelfth-century writer Hildegard of Bingen, whose tropes of being "merely a woman" with "poor feminine abilities" appear in Zilpha Elaw's autobiography as well. Women, Hildegard of Bingen wrote, possess an "airy temperament" which makes them vulnerable to illness and weakness. But that airy openness, she also insisted, makes them vulnerable to the movement of God's spirit,⁴ perhaps more open than those who are more well-defended by their gender privilege. Like Hildegard, Zilpha Elaw knew how to feel along the edges of tropes that seem to denigrate her and find the latch that, when opened, made more space, not less, for the pursuit of her calling to preach and to develop the contemplative homiletics that makes of our particularity a ladder to lower into the depths where God is found.

Howard Thurman is another important interlocutor for La Ronda. As for Zilpha Elaw, Thurman's contemplative attention to particularity is also a form of resistance to violence. In his powerful testimony against segregation, *The Luminous Darkness*, Thurman writes that religious experience, for him, "seems to swing wide the door, not merely into Life but into lives"—lives in all their particularity. In the midst of the violence of Jim Crow, Thurman wrote, "I am confident that my own call to the religious vocation cannot be separated from the slowly emerging disclosure that my religious experience makes it possible for me to experience myself as a human being and thus keep a very real psychological distance between myself and the hostilities of my environment."⁵ Thurman was sometimes mistrusted in his day for seeming to prioritize contemplation over action. But Thurman was not operating within that dichotomy, and his call to contemplation *is* a call to resistance. At a conference on mass incarceration several years ago, Andre C. Willis noted that he had been returning to the work of Howard Thurman *because* of its contemplative orientation. The dehumanizing systems held in place by violence, racism, and incarceration, he said, estrange us from ourselves, drench our subconscious in "phantom

³ Zilpha Elaw, "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw" in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 85.

⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum*, *Patrologia Latina* 197:1038a.

⁵ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1965), 111.

narratives,” and constrain our capacity to love. We’re going to need contemplative practice, he said, to heal this estrangement.⁶

That healing is what I believe La Ronda is talking about when she talks about womanist contemplative homiletics—a homiletics that freed Zilpha Elaw to speak and be heard across seemingly uncrossable borders and Howard Thurman to resist the dehumanizing systems that threatened to overwhelm the sacred particularity of each person.

Zilpha Elaw and Howard Thurman were not just great preachers; they were also powerful practitioners of public prayer. But for both of them, the richness of their interior life with God made it difficult, at first, for them to pray in public. Zilpha Elaw reports the first time she prayed in public, she could hardly get started because, as she wrote, “God was so powerfully near to me.” A “solemn stillness rested” on her soul, she said, and she felt that she was somehow above the earth—above, as she put it, all earthly things. How could she lead others in prayer from such a transcendent place? But finally, she begins to pray, and it seems to her that she can hear God rustling in the tops of the mulberry trees.⁷ No longer is she above the earth, but on the earth, part of the creation through which God’s spirit is moving. Everyone present is so moved by her prayers, so caught up in them, that they ask her to pray at every meeting, and they seek out her counsel and her pastoral care. In many ways, her vocation to ministry was born in the moment when she opened her life with God to others.

Howard Thurman tells a similar story in his autobiography. He did not have trouble finding his voice, but he felt very self-conscious in public prayer and found it difficult to speak authentically, from his inner spirit. “My felt needs were so profound,” he wrote, “that at first there seemed little room for the...needs of my congregation. But as I began to acquiesce to the demands of the spirit within, I found no need to differentiate” their need from mine. “I became more and more a part of the life of my people and discovered that at last I was able to pray in public as if I were alone in the quiet of my own room. The door between their questing spirits and my own became a swinging door.”⁸ Through bringing his own particularity into his public prayer, he began to experience his quest and the quests of his congregants as one—a common quest, a common journey.

One question I raised for La Ronda had to do with a word that was noticeably absent from her paper: “identity.” I wondered if that was a conscious choice, and if so, what was she thinking about it? La Ronda writes of particularity, which seems to me a larger category—our particularity includes our identities, for sure, but it also feels like more than our identities. And yet, identity is the word on everyone’s lips these days. Is there somewhere particularity can take us that a focus on identity can’t?

La Ronda replied that she understood particularity to include our connections with other beings, especially with our ancestors. More attention to and engagement with ancestors, La Ronda believes, is a way to both understand ourselves and connect with others across all that divides us. A womanist contemplative homiletic, she argues, could help us explore the engagement with ancestors as a shared human experience undergirding our spirituality.

My other question for La Ronda had to do with Howard Thurman. La Ronda says that Thurman’s ideas of particularity, interiority, and spirituality remain, as she puts it, tethered to

⁶ Andre C. Willis, Conference on Christianity, Race and Mass Incarceration, Harvard Divinity School, October 19-20, 2017.

⁷ Elaw, 67.

⁸ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 73.

reason and an intellectual form of understanding. Is this fair to Thurman? He's an intellectual, to be sure. But he also draws on many forms of knowing. When he's talking in *The Luminous Darkness* about listening for the sound of the genuine in another, he writes, "Such an experience cannot become a dogma—it has to remain experiential all the way."⁹ And his image of the swinging door, and how his prayer flows out and the prayers of others flow in also seems very experiential and difficult to describe in any sort of systematic way. My question for La Ronda had to do with how she was thinking of Howard Thurman as a resource for her project and, more broadly, how she thought of reason and intellectual forms of understanding as resources. How do they fit into a womanist contemplative homiletic?

La Ronda answered this question, in part, by her own intellectual work on the writings of Zilpha Elaw and Howard Thurman, work that is suffused with her attention to her own particularity—a particularity that doesn't stop at the boundaries of her identity but that pushes further out, into her connections with other living beings and with her ancestors, both known and unknown. La Ronda's understanding of particularity challenges me to reconsider what I mean by "interiority" and "contemplative life." With Howard Thurman, she insists that religious experience opens "not merely into Life but into lives." And with Zilpha Elaw, she is crafting a womanist contemplative homiletic that nurtures attention to particularity as the ground of genuine connection with others

⁹ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, 111.