

Howard Thurman (1899-1981)

The significance of the religion of Jesus to people who stand with their backs against the wall has always seemed to me to be crucial. It is one emphasis which has been lacking.

It is a privilege, after so long a time, to set down what seems to me to be an essentially creative and prognostic interpretation of Jesus as religious subject rather than religious object. It is necessary to examine the religion of Jesus against the background of his own age and people, and to inquire into the content of his teaching with reference to the disinherited and the underprivileged.

There is one overmastering problem that the socially and politically disinherited always face. Under what terms is survival possible? . . . [Jesus] recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them. "To revile because one has been reviled—this is the real evil because it is the evil of the soul itself." Jesus saw this with almighty clarity. Again and again he came back to the inner life of the individual. With increasing insight and startling accuracy he placed the finger on the "inward center" as the crucial arena where the issues would determine the destiny of his people.

The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind of Jesus. "In him was life, and the life was the life of men." Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.

For years it has been a part of my own quest so to understand the religion of Jesus that interest in his way of life could be developed and sustained by intelligent men and women who were at the same time deeply victimized by the Christian Church's betrayal of his faith.

Living in a climate of deep insecurity, Jesus, faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees, had to find some other basis upon which to establish a sense of well-being. "The kingdom of God is within you." "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor." The basic principles of his way of life cut straight through to the despair of his fellows and found it groundless. By inference he says, "You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception and dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea—Nay; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven."

The core of the analysis of Jesus is that man is a child of God, the God of life that sustains all of nature and guarantees all the intricacies of the life process. This idea—that God is mindful of the individual—is of tremendous import in dealing with fear as a disease.

[His grandmother heard a slave preacher say at the end of every sermon]: “You—you are not niggers. You—you are not slaves. You are God’s children.” This established for them the ground of personal dignity, so that a profound sense of personal worth could absorb the fear reaction. . . . It lifts that mere man to a place of pre-eminence that belongs to God and to God alone. Such a man recognizes that death cannot possibly be the worst thing in the world. . . . The awareness that a man is a child of the God of religion, who is at one and the same time the God of life, creates a profound faith in life that nothing can destroy. To the degree to which a man knows *this*, he is unconquerable from within and without.

There is a core of aloneness at the heart of living. There are thresholds before which all men stop; only God may tread and even He in disguise. Each soul must learn how to be independent of all secondary relations and involvements. We walk a part of the way together but on the upper reaches each path leads to the heights alone. Ultimately, I am alone; so vastly alone that in my aloneness is all the life of the universe. In such moments of profound awareness, I seem to be all that there is in the universe and all that there is seems to be I. In the mystic’s moment of fountal unity all divisions, all tensions are resolved—only the vision, only the experience itself is the reality. And yet this is not an accurate statement of what transpires; the experience of unity is a breakdown of awareness that transcends experience. But this does not last.

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 God. He uses symbolism to help him keep alive this sense of Presence. He discovers, however, that it is not possible to keep the consciousness of the presence of God alive at a high point in his experience over long intervals of time. Again, he comes upon the fact that deep within the structure of his own personality and life are the things which obscure and blot out this vision.

We want deliverance from things which divide, which bind and render us impotent and purposeless. We want to find a controlling purpose for our living and our lives. With relentlessness and fever we seek to find meaning, in some ultimate sense, for our lives so that we may be able to live with dignity and courage in our world. This the mystic achieves by what to him is an experience of an Absolute Good and his ethical task is to retain that good in the ‘for instances’ of experience.

With such a conviction the mystic insists that his human relations conform more and more to the demands of his inner graces, his inner equilibrium in which is his consciousness of the active presence of God. Humanity is viewed as a unit within which are particular individuals all of whom must yield to the control of God. This calls for the highest possible ethical demands for one’s conduct, for one’s ongoing relations.

Humility comes only when a man looks at himself, what he is, in the quiet but penetrating glow of his vision of God. Without this he cannot maintain the necessary increment of humility at the very center of his ethical behavior. He has been loved by God, he has received the blessings of his presence as an act of grace and he must salute the good that there is in the other by the quality of humility present in his deeds for the other. . . . It is only in the presence of God, in the moment when one is caught up in all-embracing unity that this new way of seeing one’s self in one’s relations is achieved. . . . The highest mystic insists that the essence of right acting is that it should be performed without regard to merit, to reward or punishment.