

Response Paper to “What’s Love Got to Do with It? The Mysticism of Howard Thurman

Written by Reverend Wayne Arnason

Respondent: Reverend Kathleen Rolenz

November 2010

“Be Still and Know that I am God.” Psalm

In the dark of every morning, two people sit side by side in meditation, reflection and prayer. One—a Buddhist, is in meditation, and the focus of that meditation is emptying the mind to be fully present to the breath. The other, a Christian, is engaged in prayer through scripture study, and then, while sitting in meditation, is often having an internal conversation with God. The purpose of that time for the Christian is to be drawn ever more deeply into God’s embrace, and to be aware of God’s presence throughout the day. It must be fairly obvious to the listeners that these two individuals are both the author of and respondent to, the paper “What’s love got to do with it? The Mysticism of Howard Thurman. The question that lay at the heart of Rev. Arnason’s paper is simply this: “How important is it that Thurman’s mysticism be framed theistically?” Although Thurman’s experience of the Holy was broad and inclusive (i.e, the Fellowship Church of all Peoples) he never deviated from the tap root of his religious, spiritual and devotional life—God. In other words, can a non-theistic Buddhist truly understand Thurman’s mystical experience? Does one need to have a relationship with God to completely embrace Thurman’s mysticism?

Reverend Arnason has done a masterful examination of Thurman’s mystical influences. He describes Thurman’s experience of *self-dissolving* in response to the power of the natural world, as experienced in watching powerful storms sweep across the ocean. He describes a mystical moment during Thurman’s ordination, when “the heavens opened up and the spirit descended like a dove...ever since when it seems I am deserted *by the Voice that called me forth*, I know that if I can find my way back to that moment, the clouds will lift and the path before me will once again be clear and beckoning..” Thurman’s mentor, Rufus Jones, defines mysticism as an emphasis on the immediate awareness of a relationship with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine

Presence...which includes not only personal attitudes toward God, but a recognition of the primary experience of God within the inner core of the individual. For Thurman, then, the definition of mysticism is: "the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own spirit."¹ But what is this God about which Thurman writes so eloquently? What are the qualities that comprise God? Is he the God of the ocean and stormy seas; the God of the dove that descended during his ordination, or the God found in the communion service, as the Holy Spirit? Thurman identifies with a personal God as a friend, as Arnason notes in his paper "this friend, that he calls God, that comes to him in the wisdom and poetry of the ages, in the unexpected encounter, in the most personal intimate moments of our lives, is one with the memories, knowledge and wisdom we carry, that go deeper than our own experience." At the same time, nowhere does Thurman actually describe his "friend." It's as if he tells us about what his friend does, but not what s/he look like, nor can he truly describe his friend. Instead, in the tradition of all good mystics, Thurman gets to God sideways, through the back doors of poetry, metaphor, liturgy, silence and prayer.

But aren't there problems with naming the primary source of one's mystical experience as-- Friend? Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön was asked to explore the difference between theism and Buddhist's non-theism. She writes:

"The difference between theism and nontheism is not whether one does or does not believe in God.[...] Theism is a deep-seated conviction that there's some hand to hold [...] Non-theism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves [...] Nontheism is finally realizing there is no babysitter you can count on."²

For some non-theists, the metaphor of God as friend simply doesn't work. As one bumper sticker I saw puts it: "God: An Imaginary friend for Grown-Ups." For Chödrön, God is understood as a reliable babysitter, extending a make-believe hand to hold when things go wrong. Arnason later said: "A

¹ Thurman, Howard. *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, Pendle Hill Pamphlets, May 1961, pg. 6

² [▲] Chodron, Pema (2002). *When Things Fall Apart*. Shambhala Publications, Inc.. pp. 39f. [ISBN 1-570-62969-2](https://www.amazon.com/dp/1570629692).

Humanist might be willing to say that the friend is Love, and our lineage of Universalist forebears would say the distinction is irrelevant—that God is Love and God is known first and foremost through how we experience and act in love.”³ It’s a familiar reference, to equate God with Love, and Love with God. To experience mysticism, Thurman notes, he says “In the kind of religion I have been describing, which is essentially the religion of the inner light, the individual has a sense of experiencing the love of God...”⁴

Is it essential, then, to experience God’s love to experience the mystical?

friends...(experience of walking and hearing rushing water, rumbling, old Erie Canal...surface noises stopped...”Eckhar’ts famous reference to the Godhead, the “Nameless Nothing.’ Gate, gate, parasamgate.

In his little book, *A Testament of Devotion*, mystic and teacher Thomas Kelly wrote: “When we are drowned in the overwhelming seas of the love of God, we find ourselves in a new and particular relation to a few of our fellows.” For Thurman, that experience of feeling swept up in the storms embrace; of self-dissolving in response to the power of the natural world was

...I was aware that God was not yet done with me, that I need never fear the darkness, nor delude myself that the contradictions of life are final. I was ready now for my journey...pg. 83 *With Head and Heart*

As time went by, I accumulated experiences of this kind and my capabilities and my confidence grew steadily, slow. I began to explore my inner regions, and to cultivate an inner life of prayer and meditation. The experience of religion became increasingly central to my development. This was revealed to me in the gradual change in my attitude toward leading my congregation in public prayer. From the beginning of my ministry, I tended to be highly self-conscious in public prayer. I found it difficult to express, in public, utterances of the inner spirit. But as I began to acquiesce to the demands of the spirit within, I found no need to differentiate human need, theirs and my own. I became more and more a part of the life of my people...At times I would lose my way in the full tide of emotions as a sense of the love of God overwhelmed me. At such moments we became one in the presence of

³ Arnason, Wayne. *What’s Love Got to Do with It? The Mysticism of Howard Thurman*. November 2010, pg. 17.

⁴ *Mysticism and The Experience of Love*

God...At the same time, my preaching became less motivated by the desire to "teach: it became almost entirely devoted to the meaning of the experience of our common quest and journey...pg. 73.

Ever since then when it seems that I am deserted by the Vice that called me forth, I know that if I can find my way back to that moment, the clouds will lift and the path before me will once again be clear and beckoning. Pg. 58

A loving response to a personal God that outreaches through direct encounter;

A contemplative response to a God known through the mind...an obedient and confident response to a God known through inner experience.

The givenness of God as expressed in the hunger of the heart. Page 6.

Thurman believed you could not love anyone, whether another human being or God, until you had come to terms with what it meant to be alone in the world. Pg 8-9...a place to which we must go if we are to realize in the deepest possible way that even in our aloneness we are always connected to a life greater than our own, which he called God. ...page 9

We have made an idol of togetherness. It is the watchword of our times, it is more and more the substitute for god...the inward journey, pg. 111