

*The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volume 1: My People Need Me, June 1918–March 1936.* Edited by Walter Earl Fluker, Kai Jackson Issa, Quinton H. Dixie, Peter Eisenstadt, and Catherine Tumber. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009. 377 pp. ISBN: 9781570038044. \$59.95.

*The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volume 2: Christian, Who Calls Me a Christian? April 1936–August 1943.* Edited by Walter Earl Fluker, Kai Jackson Issa, Quinton H. Dixie, Peter Eisenstadt, and Catherine Tumber. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011. 496 pp. ISBN: 9781611170436. \$59.95.

*The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman* includes letters, speeches, interviews, unpublished manuscripts, interviews, and even poetry of this leading twentieth-century African American intellectual. Howard Thurman (1899–1981) was one of the best-known American preachers of the mid-twentieth century, organized one of the first interracial churches in the United States, and was on the vanguard of African American religious intellectuals who conceived the theological infrastructure of and developed tactical principles for the civil rights movement.

Drawing from 58,000 archived documents, editors selected approximately 250 writings and 600 letters, or around 9 percent of the available Thurman corpus, to represent Thurman and his activities. Comprised of Thurman scholars and specialists in African American religious history, the editorial team and advisory board of the Howard Thurman Papers Project have succeeded in assembling a collection that reflects the breadth, depth, and moral agility of Thurman's thought. The editors clearly explain their transcription policy, which adheres to the high standards established by modern documentary editions, taking particular inspiration from *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*

Readers of Thurman's best-known works, such as *Jesus and the Disinherited* and *Searching for Common Ground*, are now able to trace the development of Thurman's thinking about the role of religion in social change, Thurman's close identification with nature, and the connection between spiritual inwardness and

active engagement in public life. Thus far, the University of South Carolina Press has published two volumes of the projected four-volume set.

*Volume 1: My People Need Me, June 1918–March 1936*, begins with Thurman's final year of high school and culminates in his leadership of the "Pilgrimage of Friendship" to India, Ceylon, and Burma, during which he became the first African American leader to meet with Gandhi. The earliest piece of Thurman correspondence is a letter to Mordecai Johnson, then a minister who would soon become president of Howard University. An eighteen-year-old Thurman, in his final year of high school, asks Johnson to "please a take a personal interest in me and guide me and God will reward you, for you are God's trustee" (1:2). The letter inaugurated a multidecade relationship between the two and predicted Thurman's involvement with a group of leading African American religious thinkers, including Johnson, Benjamin E. Mays, Channing Tobias, and William Stuart Nelson, as well as a younger generation, including Peter Paris and Walter E. Fluker, both of whom are on the *Papers* editorial team.

The first volume witnesses how Thurman's theological perspective developed during the interwar years, against the backdrop of innovative expressions of black personhood, the elaboration of pan-African and diasporic identities, a burgeoning black politics, and increasing political and economic clout of black organizations. In the midst of these developments, Thurman identified a paradox that Christians affirm brotherliness while many churches supported segregation.

In "Let Ministers Be Christian!," a 1925 essay written while he was in seminary, Thurman emphasized the responsibility of congregational leaders to model the attitude of Christ, which stresses "the sacredness of human personality" as well as "the interdependence of all men" (1:44). Referring to a passage in Matthew where Jesus counsels "in so far as you did it one of these brothers of mine, even to the least of them, you did it to me," Thurman concluded that this "applies to all men, not to Nordics alone" (1:44). Living according to this revolutionary gospel would have stark theological implications for American life: "Do those words mean that every time a Negro is lynched and burned that God is lynched and burned? Do they mean that God is held as a peon in certain parts of this land of 'Liberty'? Do they mean that God is discriminated against, segregated and packed in Jim Crow cars?" (1:44). Readers can discern in this essay the seeds of a distinction that Thurman would later make between Christianity, as the name

that particular institutions use and that may or may not live up to their own expressed standards, and the religion of Jesus, as the clearest articulations of Jesus's expectations for how human beings ought to live.

Central to Jesus's expectations, according to Thurman, is living peacefully. In a 1929 article, Thurman, an early member of the pacifist and largely white Fellowship of Reconciliation, argued that "it is a very simple matter for people who form the dominant group in a society to develop what they call a philosophy of pacifism that makes few, if any, demands upon their ethical obligations to minority groups with which they may be having contacts" (1:145). Thurman's pacifism offers an important historical example for contemporary criticisms that Peace Studies scholarship does not engage with pacifists of color.<sup>1</sup>

The first volume concludes with a substantial section devoted to the "Pilgrimage of Friendship," the Thurman-led delegation of four black African Americans who toured India, Ceylon, and Burma by invitation of the International Student Christian Movement (the joint YMCA and YWCA).<sup>2</sup> The editors included Thurman's speeches, diary entries, and detailed travel itineraries. Perhaps most revealing of Thurman are the many letters he wrote in the six months ahead of the journey to a diverse group of social theorists and activists from whom Thurman requested expert reflection about the socioeconomic condition of black Americans, Hindu-Christian relations, and Gandhi's political organizing. The letters demonstrate Thurman's painstaking preparation for a trip that he anticipated would have significant repercussions in his own religious outlook and might portend new social and religious possibilities for black and white Americans.

In the second volume, *Christian, Who Calls Me a Christian? April 1936–August 1943*, readers witness Thurman's struggles to come to terms with lessons from his South Asia journey. For example, in a 1937 letter to Max Yergan, who had extensive experience working for the YMCA in India and South Africa, Thurman explained, "we have been to India and we have seen for ourselves." The trip, according to Thurman, revealed what "Imperialism truly involves" (2:26). In a letter the same year to a seminary chaplain, Thurman described his efforts to create an exchange program for black undergraduates to travel in India, because "a great deal of genuine stimulation can be given to Negroes as a whole through their knowledge of the struggles of other people in other parts of the world" (2:33). Thurman's experiences in South Asia convinced him that international travel

could provide black Americans a critical distance from which to view the political and religious landscape of the United States in a new light.

The India trip indeed posed profound theological challenges. In their meeting, Gandhi had asked Thurman why he was a Christian when Christianity was associated with colonialism the world over. One of Thurman's "first extended efforts to come to terms with the implications of Gandhi and Gandhianism" is in a series of lectures called "The Significance of Jesus." Though Thurman never referred to Gandhi by name, he attempted, as the editors show, "to place the struggle for socially transformational nonviolent action in a personal spiritual context and Christian framework" (2:46). The arguments Thurman pursued in these previously unpublished lectures became integral to the theological foundations that would later support the civil rights movement. The significance of Jesus was, Thurman argued, that "his example points to a better world, a 'new community,' and way to achieve it" (2:82). Thurman emphasized the practicality of this ancient example for contemporary black Americans to confront racial injustice in the United States, for "Jesus's life offers a technique by which the dream might be translated into practical terms of human experience" (2:85).

Thurman, the editors note, did not reduce religion to political involvement. Rather, he argued the opposite, that religious conviction leads to political engagement with pressing social issues. The editors convincingly show how "Thurman's theological vision is forged on the borderlands between American liberal theology, mystical experience, and the black Christian tradition of protest, racial uplift, and social advancement of the race" (2:xxi). In so doing, the editors have provided a richer account of Thurman's theology and enriched our historical record of American religious thought.

Although Thurman is a towering intellectual figure of the last century, there has yet to be a comprehensive biography. These volumes should not substitute for a Thurman biography, but the editors undertook "a great deal of original and painstaking research . . . into a number of aspects of Thurman's life" (1:xxxviii). The first volume includes a lengthy biographical introduction, as well as a chronology of Thurman's life. Arranged chronologically and divided into chapters reflecting the stages of Thurman's career, the volumes present a thorough biographical sketch of Thurman himself and shed light on critical theological, social, and political discussions of the last century. Each document includes an

explanatory headnote and, when necessary, endnotes to situate the persons, places, and events in relation to Thurman's thought and in the larger historical frame.

As advisory editor Luther Smith insists in his preface to the collection, "this annotation, however, does not hijack the reader's opportunity to interpret meanings and implications of documents" (1:xx). For example, volume 1 includes Thurman's 1926 master of divinity thesis, which he wrote about premarital sex. I have found Thurman's insistence that a sexual ethic is integral to social ethics generative in my own work, for Thurman's thesis may contribute to contemporary constructive projects that insist on sexuality's importance to social, political, and economic relations of power.

Available volumes trace Thurman's connections to other leading intellectuals, artists, and activists of the period, including Reinhold Niebuhr, Langston Hughes, Mary McLeod Bethune, and A. J. Muste. *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman* is the signal contribution to Thurman scholarship and advances African American religious history and American intellectual history.

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## Notes

1. For example, Marvin J. Berlowitz, "Eurocentric Contradictions in Peace Studies," *Peace Review* 14, no. 1 (2002): 61–65; and Manning Marable, "Peace and Black Liberation: The Contributions of W. E. B. Du Bois," *Science and Society* 47 (1983–84): 385–405.
2. Two of the *Papers* editors have written an excellent account of Thurman's India trip: Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011).