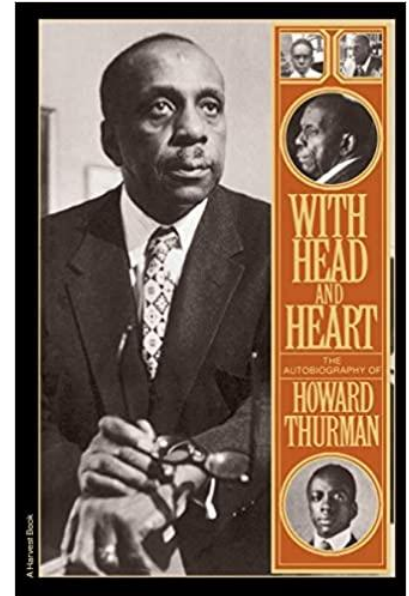


An Amazing Life of True Christianity

a review of

**With Head and Heart:
The Autobiography of
Howard Thurman**

By Howard Thurman (1979)



In this autobiography Rev. Howard Thurman narrates the highlights of his upbringing and career as one of America's foremost preachers of the Christianity of Jesus himself. This story has become known under the rubric "liberation theology" except that Thurman was a man who crafted words to move the spirit, not to explicate a theology.

This approach to religion differs dramatically from the rituals, dogmas, and imperial roles that later came to characterize Christianity in the eyes of many from around the world, including within the Western World, as evidenced first by the Protestant Reformation and many subsequent movements of dissension from new orthodoxies. A turning point for Thurman was his 1935 trip to India, Burma, and Ceylon, where he met with many luminaries, including Gandhi and Tagore.

But it was a hard question from the Law College in Ceylon that forced a reckoning: "[Blacks] have been brutalized, lynched, burned, and denied most civil rights by Christians...[Anyone] here in our country on behalf of a Christian enterprise is a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth". He responded that "I make a careful distinction between Christianity and the religion of Jesus" (p 114). He fully explains this distinction in his most famous work "Jesus and the

Disinherited” – how the “Christian enterprise” has betrayed the actual teachings of Jesus in his rebellion against the Roman Empire.

Later Gandhi verified the challenge: “Christianity, as it is practiced, ...has been identified with Western culture, with Western civilization and colonialism” (p 135). But Gandhi’s response was not against Christianity but to revitalize his own people: “I became the spearhead for a movement for the building of a new self-respect, a fresh self-image for the untouchables in Indian society. I felt that the impact of this would be the release of the energy needed to sustain a commitment to nonviolent direct action” (p 134). That became exactly what Thurman sought to do for the blacks in America through the rest of his career.

Another amazing consequence of this trip, that I had not been aware of, was his foundational role in forming and leading the “Church for the Fellowship to All Peoples” in San Francisco (1944 – 1953). This pioneering enterprise was truly international, multi-ethnic / multi-racial, and ecumenical. Later he created a similar religious spirit at Boston University (1954-1965) before retiring. His earlier development of international spirituality at the Rankin Chapel of Howard University Washington, DC, (1932 - 1943) had come full circle.