THEY LOOKED FOR A CITY:
A COMPARISON OF THE IDEA
OF COMMUNITY IN HOWARD THURMAN
AND MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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ABSTRACT

Howard Thurman (1900–1981) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) were both Christian ministers and social prophets who made significant contributions to the religious and social life of America and the world. Although Howard Thurman is the lesser known of the two, his life and ministry influenced many highly visible individuals (including King) in American society and the larger world community. Both thinkers were also black Americans whose earliest experiences of oppression based on the coalescence of color and race in the segregated South had a profound impact on their quests and interpretations of human community. These early experiences, and later ones, are given in autobiographical statements throughout their writings, sermons, and speeches. While this dimension of their lives and its influence on the development of their understandings of community is a major concern of this essay, the fundamental problem addressed here is the ideal of community in Thurman and King.

   In the following, the continuities and discontinuities in the two thinkers' perspectives will be presented. The discussion will center upon three foci which form an analytical construct for the comparison: 1) the experiential and intellectual sources of community; 2) the nature of the ideal community; and 3) the actualization of community. In summary remarks, significant themes in both will be presented which can serve as the basis for further discussion in religious ethics on the problem of community.

"But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for the Lord has prepared for them a city."

Hebrews 11:16

INTRODUCTION

   Howard Thurman (1900–1981) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) were both Christian ministers and social prophets who made significant

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contributions to the religious and social life of America and the world. Although Howard Thurman is the lesser known of the two, his life and ministry influenced many highly visible individuals (including King) in American society and the larger world community. (Smith, Luther, 1981: 118–119; Millet, 1982: 71–90; Young, 1983: xiii–xix). Both thinkers were also African-Americans whose earliest experiences of oppression based on the coalescence of color and race in the segregated South had a profound impact on their quests and interpretations of human community. These early experiences, as well as later ones, are given in autobiographical statements throughout their writings, sermons, and speeches. While this dimension of their lives and its influence on the development of their understandings of community is a major concern of this discussion, the fundamental problem addressed here is the ideal of community in Thurman and King.

"Community" is both a *descriptive* and *normative* term (Minar and Greer, 1969: 6). The specific use of "community" in Thurman and King is founded upon theological and philosophical idealism, which maintains that mind and spiritual values are fundamental in the world as a whole. Their general metaphysical views are teleological, and it is in this context that their definitions of community are best understood. In this discussion, therefore, the term "ideal of community" refers to community in two respects: as the norm for ethical reflection and the goal toward which all of life strives. Thurman's and King's conceptions of community fall appropriately in the mutual/personal model outlined by Frank Kirkpatrick as one of three traditionally held views of community in Western social philosophy and religion. Here community is understood as "a mutuality in which distinct persons find fulfillment in and through living for each other in loving fellowship" (Kirkpatrick, 1986: 2). The significance of this study lies in its examination of the two subjects' respective approaches to the explication and application of the ideal community. It is my claim that a comparative analysis of the problem in Thurman and King can yield fruitful insight into the conception, character, and actualization of human community.

This essay utilizes analytic and comparative modes to interpret each thinker's understanding of community. Basic questions are raised for both which serve as the essential structure for the method of the study. Since Thurman and King gave autobiographical clues as to their personal quests for community, the first question is concerned with the experiential and intellectual sources of the ideal in their respective searches: *What were the social and intellectual sources which informed and shaped their understandings of community?* The second question is concerned with the nature of community: *How is community conceived? What is its character?* Thirdly, the question of the actualization of community is

raised: *What are the barriers to be overcome in the actualization of community? How is community actualized?*

In the following, the continuities and discontinuities in the two thinkers' perspectives will be presented. The discussion will follow the pattern of the questions which formed the analytical construct for the comparison: 1) the experiential and intellectual sources of community; 2) the nature of the ideal of community; and 3) the actualization of community. In summary remarks, significant themes in both will be presented which can serve as the basis for further discussion.

THE EXPERIENTIAL AND INTELLECTUAL SOURCES OF THE IDEAL OF COMMUNITY IN HOWARD THURMAN AND MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

The African-American community (Blackwell, 1975: xi,5) was the primary context for the development of the ideal of community in Thurman and King. Although both men were educated in leading white liberal seminaries and universities, their respective understandings of community arose initially from their common experience of oppression and segregation as black Americans in the deep South. Their early childhood experiences in the contexts of family, the black church, black schools (especially Morehouse College) and the black communities of Daytona, Florida, and Atlanta, Georgia provided them with a sense of personal worth and an awareness of the interrelatedness of life which became key elements in their respective views. While each man represents a distinct social origin and class orientation within the African-American community, the common experience of being black and victimized by segregated statutes and policies, combined with the unique insights of the African-American religious experience, led both to raise fundamental questions about the relation of Christianity to racism and formed the backdrop for their respective methods for creating community. For both, the central, axiomatic questions underlying their visions of community are *How Does Christianity address the problem of American racism?* and *What is the most moral and practical method for overcoming racism in American society?* This is not to suggest that the issue of class was not an important barrier which each sought to overcome, but the question of racism within the context of American society was their initial problematic (Thurman, 1979: 9–29; King, 1964a, 72).

In each thinker there is an evolution in perspective. Both acknowledge that early in their development, their conceptions of community were primarily connected to the black community. Thurman (1965: 3) says that

when he was growing up in Florida, white people did not even fit into an ethical field; rather relationships with whites were considered amoral. Similarly, King (1964a:72) indicates that it was not until his experience on the Atlanta Intercollegiate Council that he was able to conquer his "anti-white feeling." Through knowledge and exposure, however, both grew beyond these narrow understandings of community into a vision which was inclusive of, yet transcended, racial, cultural, religious, and national loyalties. For both, the growth of the ideal was rooted not only in their intellectual quests, but in practical engagement with their initial problematic. A major theme which emerges for each is that *out of the particularity of their oppressed status as black men in American society, their respective understandings of faith provided the source and the method to seek universal fellowship* (Cannon, 1988:160–174). The source of this universalism within the black community is well-established, as documented by what Peter Paris has called "the black Christian tradition" (1985:10–20). Hence, their intellectual searches for community must be understood within the social contexts of these early experiences.

While the black experience of community is fundamental in understanding the development of the ideal in Thurman and King, it is equally important to see how their common experience of struggle to achieve universal community out of the particularity of the black religious experience found creative affinity with American religious liberalism. Such a perspective also helps to explain the parallel themes found in each and answers, in part, the question of Thurman's influence upon King. Several writers have made reference to the influence of Howard Thurman on his younger fellow visionary, but no scholarly treatment has demonstrated a formal tie between the two (Ansbro, 1982: 27–29, 272; Bennett, 1976: 74–75; *Boston Globe,* 1982: 13–14; Smith, L. 1981: 118–119; Baldwin, 1986: 20–21; Young, 1983: 154–155). Perhaps Thurman's own accounting of the nature of their relationship is sufficient. Thurman relates only two instances of meeting with King. One was in the informal setting of his Boston home, while King was a Ph.D. candidate, and the other took place after the tragic stabbing of King in Harlem. Neither meeting seems to indicate any substantive exchange on philosophies of thought and action (Thurman, 1979: 254–255; Thurman, 1tr, 1958; King, 1tr, 1958). Thurman's modest acknowledgement of his influence upon King, however, should not be taken as the final word on this intriguing relationship between these black titans. His ministry *to* the younger visionary seems to have been that of a counselor and interpreter of the latter's spiritual quest (Thurman, 1968).

The continuities between the African-American religious experience and American religious liberalism and their impact upon the thinking of King and Thurman can be seen in the common themes of *the interrelatedness of all life, the primacy of religious experience, personality-centered*

Christianity, the moral order of the universe, the love, power, and justice of God, the dignity and worth of human personality, and *the social nature of human existence.* An in-depth analysis of the continuities of these traditions and the implications for the vision of community in Thurman and King cannot be explored here, yet a brief overview of significant intellectual sources for American liberal theology (Cauthen, 1962; Ahlstrom, 1972:763–804) is revealing. Thurman's mentors at Rochester Theological Seminary, George Cross, Conrad Moelhman, Henry Robins, and later, Rufus Jones at Haverford College, were located squarely within the American Protestant liberal tradition (Thurman, 1979:52–54; Smith, L. 1981: 25–27). Cross, in particular, was influenced by the evangelical liberal tradition, which had roots in personal idealism (Smith, 1981:23; Cauthen, 1962: 27–29; Roberts and Van Dusen, 1942). Smith also indicates that Rufus Jones, like Cross and Robins, can be located within the theological stream of evangelical liberalism, and as Cross and Robins were concerned respectively with the essence of Christian faith and religion, Jones' concern is with the essence of Christian mysticism (Smith, 1981: 27–30; Cauthen, 1962: 36; Brown, 1913). There are important differences, however, between Thurman and his evangelical liberal mentors with respect to their views on the source of authority (the Bible and Jesus) and the ultimate vision of community (Smith, L. 1981: 73–77). Luther Smith (1981: 75) places Thurman within the modernistic liberal tradition under the heading of "metaphysical or rationalistic modernism," which is the same designation which Kenneth Cauthen (1962: 36–37) gives to E. S. Brightman, King's major professor at Boston University.

King (1964a: 73, 82) acknowledged his indebtedness to the Protestant liberal theology of Rauschenbusch and the personal idealism of Boston University (Smith and Zepp, 1974: 29, 99). King's vision of the beloved community, like Thurman's, however, was also bred and nurtured in the black church tradition, which has historically seen its particular struggle for the liberation of black people through the prism of universal liberation of all peoples. The universal themes of forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope which characterized King's and Thurman's vision of community have always been fundamental to the black community in general, and the black church in particular. (Cone, 1984: 416; Smith, 1972: 2; Jones, 77–78, 59–65; Watley, 1985: 17–45; Smith and Zepp, 1974: 100–104; Paris, 1985).

THE NATURE OF COMMUNITY IN THURMAN AND KING
Conceptions of Community

Howard Thurman
  Thurman's quest for community was the central category of his life and thought. In his "search for common ground," the development of his

thinking emerged from the particularity of the black experience of community to a more universal understanding of the interrelatedness of all life. His earliest experiences with nature, his family, the black church and community of Daytona, Florida, and his education in black schools form the background for his later intellectual pursuits at Rochester Theological Seminary and Haverford College. The intellectual influences of George Cross, Olive Schreiner, Rufus Jones and others confirmed for him the genius of what he had already discovered in his early years in the African-American community (Thurman, 1979: 46–84; Smith, Luther, 1981: 19–42). His teaching and ministerial positions as pastor, professor, chaplain, and his later work with the Howard Thurman Educational Trust Fund served as spiritual and intellectual laboratories in which his vision of community could be tested and revised (Thurman, 1979: 76–212; 1959).

Community, for Thurman, refers to wholeness, integration and harmony. For him, all life is interrelated and involved in goal-seeking. In each particular manifestation of life, there is the potential for it to realize its proper form, and the actualization of potentiality in any form of life is synonymous with community. "Community" as "actualized potential" is true at all levels of life: in tiny cells and in human society (Thurman, 1971: 4). The theological dimension of Thurman's understanding of "community" is the affirmation that the Mind of God realizes itself in time. The origin and goal of community, therefore, are in the Mind of God, which is coming to itself in time. This theological dimension of community is fundamental for all Thurman's philosophical and ethical claims. The problem of "community" is explicitly stated by Thurman as "the search for common ground" (1971: xi–xiv). The nature of the problem is rooted in the relationship of the individual to social existence (Thurman, 1971: xii). While the primacy of the individual is a major concern for him, his ultimate vision is one of a harmonious human society (Thurman, 1965: 112–13).

Life, for Thurman, is a dynamic, on-going project. God is at work in creation in a manner akin to an artist shaping and re-shaping his/her masterpiece. For him, God is not finished with creation, and consequently, God is not finished with the human story which is ever unfolding and coming to itself in history. Similarly, personality is an unfinished project which involves the individual in relation to God in a concerted endeavor of free and responsible acts that issue forth in commitment and maturity.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Community was the defining motif of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and thought. From his early childhood until his death, there was a progression in his personal and intellectual understanding of the nature and goal of human existence, which he referred to as "the beloved community."

King's search for community was characterized by an insatiable thirst for truth and a deep-seated religious faith which began in his early years in the intimate contexts of his family, the black church community, and the larger black community of Atlanta, Georgia. The development of the ideal of community in King is discernible in his educational pursuits at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and later at Boston University. After his formal education and training, his experiences as pastor and spokesman for the black community in Montgomery served as a "proving ground" for his embryonic, theoretical formulation of community, which would be refined in the praxis of the Civil Rights Movement. The early development of the ideal in King reached its zenith in the March on Washington in 1963, but the following four and half years proved to be a period in which his vision of community received its severest criticisms and challenges. These final years of King's life and ministry, though beleaguered with controversy and sabotage, are the most crucial in understanding the maturation of his personal and intellectual growth in respect to community. It is in this period that one sees most clearly King's wrestling with nonviolence as a means of achieving human community, his increased realization of the international implications of his vision, and his understanding of the nature and role of conflict in the realization of human community (King, 1967; Washington, 1986: 253–358, 57–58, 62–63, 64–74; Lincoln, 1970: 157–180; Garrow, 1986: 431–624; 1981: 204–219; Fairclough, 1987: 253–384).

For Martin Luther King, Jr., all human life is interrelated and must be seen as a single process culminating in the "beloved community." The term, "beloved community," has its origins in the philosophical idealism of Josiah Royce. For Royce, the "beloved community" was the ideal Christian community, which is founded upon "loyalty" and "sacrifice" (Royce, 1968; Cartwright, 1977: 171–178). Although King's conception of the "beloved community" represents a synthesis from a wide range of thinkers, a simple working definition is "a community ordered by love." Simply stated, "community" refers to integration, mutuality, and harmony. "Love" refers to the Christian conception of *agape*. The theological dimension of the "beloved community" is primary for King (1981: 154; 1964a: 82), and therefore, the idea of a personal God, who is a creative force who works for universal wholeness, informs his philosophical and ethical claims.

The conception of community in King refers primarily to the Christian social eschatological ideal (Cartwright, 1977: 171). For King, the beloved community is synonymous with the Kingdom of God. Concretely expressed, it is the mutually cooperative venture of persons in which they realize the solidarity of the human family by assuming responsibility for one another as children of God. This was the basis of King's ethical

argument for integration and his call for world community (Washington, 1986:121).

The Triadic Character of Community

For Thurman and King, there is a triadic relationship among God, persons (individuals), and the world. These three principals are integrally related and form the basis for the dynamic character of community. As such, community is a cooperative affair comprising a totality of interaction among the three elements. Religious experience is the fundamental category for their thinking regarding community.

The comparison of their conceptions of community is most revealing in respect to their treatment of *the individual and society* and *their understandings of God*. These two pivotal concerns are inextricably related in the two thinkers and have significant implications for their recommendations for the actualization of community.

The Individual and Society

In Thurman, the relationship between individual and God is primary; the world (human society), as such, is secondary. Thurman's emphasis on the cultivation of the inner life as the basis for the development of a genuine sense of self, and consequently, for authentic existence in the world, rests on his distinction between the *inner* and *outer* modes of self-existence. For Thurman "the inner life" is primary to "world consciousness"; i.e., the internality of experience informs the externality of existence. This conception shapes his treatment of the roles of the individual and society.

His treatment of freedom and responsibility provides an excellent example of his method and its implications for the roles of the individual and society. "Freedom," for Thurman (1969), refers to a quality of being and spirit: freedom is located within; its locus is the human will. "Liberty," on the other hand, refers to external prerogatives, privileges, and grants that are conferred upon the individual from a social arrangement or context. Although Thurman treats responsibility as a shared experience in which the individual interacts responsibly with others, the *accent* is on the individual and the inner struggle to become whole. The need for social transformation arises from the individual's entrapment in the economic and political forces of oppression which hinder self-actualization (Thurman, 1939: 3–34). The normative character of community, therefore, is not an external imposition upon the individual, but is essentially within and is a disclosure of what life is about as it seeks to realize itself in myriad time-space manifestations. Martin Luther King, Jr., like the faithful pilgrim, Abraham, according to Thurman (1968), "looked for a city where the builder and maker is God." The clue to the search for the ideal city was

first and foremost within him. This is the lesson, says Thurman (1955) that every crusader for social justice must ultimately learn, that that which one seeks for "without" is found "within," for the beyond is within.

In King (1959: 19), the three principals (persons, God, and the world) are equally related in a positive, creative relationship which constitutes what he called "the dimensions of a complete life." For King, ideal human society is the product of the creative interaction of all three elements; one cannot be divorced from the other. The "ideal city of humanity" is "not unbalanced, but it is complete on all sides." Whereas for Thurman, the individual begins with his/her "own working paper," with the internality of religious experience, in King the personal and social dimensions of religious experience are treated in a dialectical framework which endeavors to maintain a balanced treatment of the two modes of existence. For the latter, the autonomy and the sociability of persons are guarded in a creative interplay between the inner and outer dimensions of religious experience. The ethic which emerges, therefore, is able to incorporate a more positive vision of the nature and role of persons as *social actors* within society. (Winter, 1968:5–6). This is not to suggest, by any means, that Thurman did not share the common conviction that social action is morally mandated for the committed individual. In fact, in his 1939 lectures, "Mysticism and Social Change," he insisted that "the ascetic impulse having as its purpose individual purification and living brings the realistic mystic face to face with the society in which he functions as a person" (Thurman, 1937:27). The difference between himself and King rests in theoretical formulation and emphasis rather in belief and intention.

King's dialectical method and his emphasis on the sociability of persons informs his treatment of freedom and responsibility. For King, an inclusive human community in which people are able to develop and realize their potential is the goal of life. Political and economic systems reflect the social nature of persons and their interdependency; and social institutions share responsibility in the development of human personality. He does not make the distinction between "freedom" and "liberty" as it is articulated by Thurman; rather freedom and liberty are conjoined in the context of social destiny. Here the emphasis is placed on society and its responsibility to persons. King, like Thurman, makes a distinction between the internal and external modes of existence. King, however, attempts to maintain a dialectical tension between the two realms which is resolved in the quest for a "responsible society" (Muelder, 1954: 19). Also like Thurman, personality, as understood by King, is only meaningful within the context of other persons and society (Winter, 1968: 7). For King, however, freedom is always within social destiny, it is not limitless nor can it be relegated to a function of the will. Thurman's understanding of freedom is

ultimately rooted in the nature and function of the will (1969: 1). This conception of freedom arises from Thurman's methodological grid for spirituality and social transformation. The sanctity of the will is the citadel where freedom is either preserved or forfeited. It is also the place for the creative adventure with the Divine Presence which calls the individual forth into engagement with the world. While Thurman submits that freedom is a birthright, an inalienable quality of the individual which cannot be granted by external prerogatives, King's understanding of freedom suggests that outside of social existence with others, freedom is a misnomer. He emphasizes the purpose and responsibility of society in insuring what Thurman refers to as the "liberty" of persons. This is the nucleus of King's argument against segregation as a social system which impedes the person's capacity to deliberate, decide and respond—in essence, to be free (King, 1967: 97–98). Again, it is important to state that Thurman's view of freedom is not ultimately opposed to King's. The difference is one of accent, not substance. Thurman was an astute observer and keen interpreter of the American democratic process, especially its implications for the eradication of white supremacy (Thurman, 1951a; 1958a; 1969; 1972a; 1981).

Theocentric and Christocentric Perspectives

An important distinction between the two thinkers is that Thurman's vision of ultimate reality is theocentric, while King's perspective is Christocentric. Both perspectives are firmly rooted in African-American theological and ethical traditions (Oglesby, 1979; Cone, 1975). Thurman's theocentric construal of reality is also similar to James Gustafson's ethical theory in *Ethics From A Theocentric Perspective* (1981). Here Gustafson argues that traditional Western theology and ethics have been anthropocentric in their focus rather than theocentric. Consequently, the anthropocentric focus has prevented us from understanding significant things about "the ultimate power and ordering of life, about the majesty and glory of all that sustains us and about the threats to life over which we have no definite control" (1981:99). He contends that the ultimate power is not the guarantor of human benefits as presupposed in our anthropocentric interpretation of God and the cosmos; rather, a theocentric construal of the world provides the moral agent with a relational ethical framework whereby we can "morally discern" the creative activity of God in nature, culture, society, and the self (Ramsey and Outka, 1968:17–36).

King, on the other hand, sees Jesus Christ as the supreme revelation of God in the world. Christ is "the language of eternity translated into time," "the New Being," and "a rock in a weary land" (King, 1965:9). For him, Christ is the *source* of the norm of the beloved community. The redemptive love of God, revealed in the cross of Christ, is King's answer to

the possibility of achieving community within history. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the symbol of the power of God and of the ultimate defeat of the forces which block the realization of community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history (King, 1981:35, 45; 1964a: 87). Thurman, on the other hand, sees Jesus as an *exemplar* of the possibilities of the committed individual in the quest for community. Jesus is not the norm of community, but an expression of the inherent potentiality of human nature to achieve the highest goal of the moral life, love. This difference may well reflect the distinction between "evangelical" and "modernistic" liberalism as the two types of American Protestant liberalism. As was noted, both thinkers were influenced by proponents of evangelical liberalism. Thurman, however, falls more appropriately into the designation of modernistic liberalism. Kenneth Cauthen claims that the main distinguishing feature of the two schools of thought are their respective treatments of Jesus Christ:

> The loose connection of the modernistic liberals within the traditional faith can be seen clearly in their estimate of Jesus. The thinking of these men was not Christocentric. Jesus was important—and even unique—because he illustrated truths and values which were universally relevant. However, these truths and values can be validated and even discovered apart from Jesus. He is not so much the *source* as he is the *exemplar* of the religious norm. Jesus might be psychologically helpful, but he was not usually thought to be logically necessary for the highest experience of God in human life. (Cauthen, 1962:29)

It should be noted that while there are clear distinctions between the two thinkers' conceptions of community, this does not suggest that their positions are mutually exclusive. Their perspectives on Jesus Christ should not be interpreted apart from the socio-historical patterns of African-American oppression. Rather, the existential reality of black oppression is the primary context in which the question of Christology is appropriately raised for Thurman and King. The fundamental question for the black Christian tradition cannot be relegated to an abstract, sanitized concern for proper theoretical formulations; rather the critical issue is always "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" James Cone contends, "If our existence were not at stake, if we did not experience the pain and the contradictions of life, then the Christological question would be no more than an intellectual exercise for professional theologians" (1975:109). The pivotal questions for Thurman and King which *form* and *in-form* their interpretations of Jesus were raised during their early years within a cruel social environment where lynchings and other barbarous acts of brutality against black people in the Deep South were daily occurrences (Thurman, 1979:39, 1981:13; 1979; King, 1964a: 72–74).

These differences regarding the place of Jesus Christ also reflect their particular historical and personal situations which, in turn, informed their understandings of community and where they chose to work for its realization. Thurman's ministry can be seen, in part, as a priestly/pastoral endeavor of enriching the spiritual life of individuals and empowering them for the work of community in society. Mozella Mitchell (1985: 53–55) referred to Thurman as a "modern day sophisticated shaman" and "a technician of the sacred." (Larsen, 1976: 9–10), suggesting that he stands somewhere between the priest and the shaman while maintaining a distinctive posture as a social prophet. King embraced a prophetic model of ministry and was visibly and concretely engaged in the quest for social justice. The shaman, unlike the prophet who speaks to the community saying, "Thus says the Lord," leads the community to God by "giving others access to the spiritual world and effects a care for their ailing condition." Mitchell (1985:88) adds that

> Thurman, in his shamanistic function, does not simply bring the message of truth from God to the religious community, but he leads individuals and the community to have an experience with the divine from which they may gain a sense of wholeness themselves.

Their treatments of the relationship of the individual and society interact with their theological perspectives. Thurman's theocentric perspective emphasizes the relationship between the individual and God or what he referred to as "the creative encounter." His primary concern is the cultivation of the "inner life" as a prelude to social transformation. Within the individual, God exists as the ground of his/her being or "the uncreated element" which transcends time-space manifestations and creaturely concerns. This is the meeting place between the Infinite and the finite; it is the locus of religious encounter between the individual and God which issues forth in community in the self and the world (Thurman, 1972a: 43, 46; 1971a: 133). For King, God is disclosed as Person in history. The *emphasis* is on the pluralistic, social nature of the cosmos of which God is creator and sustainer. Human persons have their grounding and being in the Person of God who is manifested in love and reason (Smith and Zepp, 1974: 104–110).

THE ACTUALIZATION OF COMMUNITY
The Barriers of Sin and Evil

The two major differences in Thurman's and King's conceptions of community (the roles of the individual and society and their construals of ultimate reality) shed light on their particular views on the nature and role of evil, the moral agent and the church in the actualization of community.

For Thurman and King, evil and sin are barriers to community. While their treatments differ, the limitations of this discussion will not allow for a detailed exposition of their views. A fuller treament of their perspectives on evil and sin would include important biographical notes and their common struggle to overcome the multi-faceted problems of racism and segregation. It is sufficient for our purposes to state that for both, evil is the positive and destructive principle that works against harmony, whole- ness, and integration, and that it is manifested in personal and social dimensions of human experience (Thurman, 1956: 979–1002; Thurman, 1972b: 111–119; Thurman, 1973: 64–85; 1972a: 48–55; King, 1981: 65, 76– 85, 127; 1968: 3).

Thurman's chief concern with evil was where it touched the individual in his/her personal struggle to achieve identity and purpose in the world. Consequently, he concentrated on the internal barriers to community which the individual must overcome. He identified these barriers as *fear, deception,* and *hate*. These internal triplets of oppression are directly related to what Thurman identifies as the question of the disinherited: "What does the religion of Jesus have to say to the person whose back is against the wall, the poor, the disinherited and dispossessed?" (Thurman, 1981:13, 36–88). While these are personal expressioins of evil with which the individual must contend, Thurman maintained that they are also manifested in society. He believed that the individual through spiritual discipline could ultimately overcome the internal barriers which separate him/her from the vision of God. He was convinced that when a solitary individual chooses not to cooperate with evil at the level of his/her per- sonal existence, but places his/her life on the side of goodness, that person anticipates community at the level of his/her functioning (Thurman, 1984: 278–280). Those things which the individual discovers within as impedi- ments to harmonious self-existence, she/he also discovers in society. The struggle to overcome the barriers within propels the individual into the world as an agent of reconciliation (Thurman, 1972a: 124).

While King, like Thurman, had a positive view of human nature, he also had a profound understanding of sin as both a personal and a social phenomenon. King's understanding of the radical nature of sin within human personality and its heightened dynamic in social groups led him to a position which rejected any suggestion that human agency alone could overcome the forces that work against community (Smith, E., 1981: 53– 54). King's treatment of the pervasive nature of human sin, in partciular his astute understanding of power and its relationship to social evil, demanded a doctrine of grace which made available extraordinary resources to overcome the barriers of evil and sin in personal and social existence (King, 1981: 91; 1964a: 87).

He firmly believed that as persons choose to become co-workers with

God through faith, they are empowered to overcome the barriers erected by evil and sin. Unlike Thurman, who stressed the significance of internal barriers in the realization of community within oneself, King's emphasis was on the social manifestations of evil and sin which impede the actualization of community in the world. He identified them as *poverty, racism,* and *war* (King, 1967:172–191). King did not fail to acknowledge the necessity of overcoming personal sin or internal barriers that prevent the realization of authentic self-existence. His emphasis, however, is on the social dimensions of evil and sin and the need for cooperation between persons and God in the struggle to overcome these barriers. Thurman's vision (1965) of a friendly world underneath friendly skies anticipates the same ultimate goal articulated by King.

Overcoming the Barriers to Community

For Thurman, the religious grounding of the moral life proceeds from his theocentric vision of reality. He maintained that the historical Jesus is a religious subject rather than a religious object; he is not God, but "the for instance of the mind of God." "Jesus is the revelation of how personality perfects itself and creates community" (Smith, 1981: 58). Thurman claimed that when Jesus is elevated to the status of God, the universality and inclusiveness of religious faith are jeopardized by a principle of exclusiveness. A theocentric understanding of God, on the other hand, frees the individual for a direct, immediate encounter with the living God and creates the grounds for authentic community in the world (Thurman, 1972a: 139–141, 147). The fruit of this creative encounter is love, which is the means of actualizing community.

For King, Jesus Christ is the ground and goal of the moral life. His Christocentric treatment of the moral life combines both the historical Jesus and the cosmic Christ as the normative character for community (Muelder, 1966: 155). Jesus Christ is the source of the norm of community, which is love. The cosmic Christ is not interpreted in a Christomonistic fashion, but rather in broad and universal categories which openly accept and embrace the truth claims of other religious orientations (King, 1964a: 88; 1967: 190–191).

The distinction between theocentric and Christocentric understandings of the moral life and their respective interpretations of the roles of the individual and society are important as they relate to concrete, historical application of ethical principles and the creation of community. While Thurman and King recommended *love* as the means for overcoming the barriers to community, the former concentrated on the power of love as a means of overcoming the *intenal* barriers of deception, fear, and hate. Thurman's keen insight into the problem of identity and the need to maintain a balance between one's self-fact (one's inherent worth and

dignity as a child of God) and self-image (which is given by the social environment) are rooted in his belief that in the encounter with the Divine one discovers the love of God as an experience which goes beyond good and evil. Therefore, in the presence of God, one experiences wholeness, integration, and a profound sense of being ultimately secure despite the ravages and pronouncements of the surrounding culture (Thurman, 1974: 68; 1972a: 115). This fundamental conception, he argued, forms the background for a healthy sense of self and is the quintessence of social transformation and revolution. Speaking of the Black Awareness Movement of the late 60's, Thurman says:

> I didn't have to wait for the revolution. I have never been in search for identity—and I think that [all] I've ever felt and worked on and believed in was founded in a kind of private, almost unconscious autonomy that did not seek vindication in my environment because it was in *me*. (Goodwin, 1973: 534).

King emphasized love in respect to social justice and the organization of power in the creation of a responsible society. While he also had a profound sense of the need for personal wholeness, he concentrated on the eradication of social barriers to community. He identified the major crisis of our times as the collision between immoral power and powerless morality. King's resolution of the dialectic created by this crisis was rooted in his understanding of *agape*. This interpretation of *agape* is decidedly Christocentric. The central question for King in his quest for a method to eliminate social evil is, "How is love as redemption related to just power? Is there a loving way to change unjust expressions of power and powerful embodiments of injustice?" (Muelder, 1977: 184). King's dominant concern, therefore, was the political and economic nature of social existence and its relationship to the correlates of love, power, and justice. Personal morality is weighed on the scales of one's commitment to social justice. The interior religious experience finds meaning in the context of social relations based on power (Hanigan, 1977: 200).

The discontinuities in the perspectives on love in the creation of community should not be overemphasized. It is Thurman's claim that in "the creative encounter," one is *required* and *empowered* to become an agent of reconciliation in the world. For him, the logic of individuality is fulfilled as person in community (Thurman, 1972a: 124; 1939: 27). Therefore, while King's accentuation of the social expression of love is important, it is equally enlightening to reflect on the need for love in the internal struggles to overcome the psychological forces which conspire against personal wholeness and communion (Smith, A., 1982). Thurman and King find "common ground," so to speak, in their agreement that spirituality is the

basis for social transformation and that the ultimate model of community is a personal/mutual one which seeks unity in diversity and guards the distinctiveness of persons in society.

The Nature and Role of the Church in Society

The two thinkers' conceptions of God and related treatments of the individual and society inform their views of the nature and role of the church in social change. For Thurman, the church is the social institution which is entrusted with "the Jesus idea." Jesus is not the central object of worship for the church; rather *the ideal of community* and the *ethic of love* which he taught as the means of actualizing community form the basis of the idea with which the church is entrusted. The church is the inclusive religious fellowship in which the committed individual seeks communion with those who share the common encounter with the divine Presence. Moreover, it is "the organism fed by the springs of individual and collective religious experience through which the Christian works in society" (Thurman, 1972a: 135). The central theme underlying Thurman's ecclesiology is his belief that *experiences of unity and fellowship are more compelling than the fears, dogma, and prejudices which divide and separate people*. He believed if these spiritual experiences of unity could be multiplied over a time interval of sufficient duration, they should be able to undermine any barrier that separates one person from the other (Thurman, 1959: 21; 1973: 120). These barriers include racism, classism, denominationalism, and religious beliefs which hinder authentic fellowship between individuals as children of God.

The prominent concern for Thurman, in respect to the church, however, is the spiritual cultivation of the individual through the worship/teaching ministry of the church. While the church is called upon to actualize the vision of community within its own fellowship and the world, Thurman does not counsel the church as an *institution* to confront unjust social arrangements; rather he sees the church as a spiritual pedagogue and enabler in the quest for social justice (Thurman, 1951: 32–33; 1979: 13–19; 1946:99; 1943:1–3; 1979:160; Smith, L., 1981: 129–35).

For King (1981: 141), the nature and goal of the church is Christocentric. It is the Body of Christ and the symbol of the beloved community in the world. Like Thurman, the church is called upon to demonstrate community within its own fellowship and the world (King, 1981: 58–60). Both thinkers are critical of racial, classist, and denominational exclusiveness within its institutional structures. However, King understood worship to be primarily a social experience in which persons from all levels of life realize the oneness and unity of God and the human family (King, 1967: 190; Washington, 1986; 253; King, 1964a: 10; 1981: 63). Thurman's emphasis lies with the immediacy of religious experience be-

tween God and the individual which has implications for the gathered community and its relationship to society. King beings with the social nature of the church, and worship, as such, is an expression of the social mission of the church in the world. This difference is most dramatically illustrated in their respective ministries and their understanding of *the church's role as an institution* involved in the creation of community. Thurman's pastorates and chaplaincies, and eventually his work with the Howard Thurman Educational Trust Fund, served as spiritual resources for those engaged in the quest for social justice. King, on the other hand, was able to mobilize churches as participants in the struggle for social change. From Montgomery to Memphis, the black church served as the primary source and the means through which he struggled for community in American society.

While Thurman identified the church's mission basically as a pedagogue and enabler of individuals engaged in the work of community, King's social vision of the church allowed him to see the church as the moral custodian of society. For King, this means that the church as an institution, the *ekklesia* of Christ, has a prophetic role as a creative minority within society. Its mission is to give moral direction to society and to willingly suffer as an institution the penalty for nonconformity and noncooperation with social evils which destroy human personality and ultimately impede the actualization of human community (King, 1964b: 90–91; 1981: 62–63, 18–21, 42–43).

SUMMARY

In summary, the respective treatments of community in Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr., represent two responses to the same questions which informed their personal and intellectual quests for community: How does Christianity address the problem of American racism? and What is the most moral and practical method for overcoming racism in American society? Thurman's personal pilgrimage, which he called "the search for common ground," culminated in a theocentric vision of reality which emphasized the nature and role of the committed individual in the actualization of community. King's personal odyssey toward "the beloved community" resulted in a Christocentric conception of community which stressed the nature and the role of society in the actualization of community.

The discontinuities which exist between Thurman and King are perhaps more important than the continuities. They reveal different dimensions of the common problems which their conceptualizations and recommendations address and provide new insights and directions in the creation of a model for the work of community in the world. Their

approaches to the problem of community can serve as sources for further discussion in religious ethics on the ideal of community. Prominent themes which demand further examination in Thurman and King include 1) spirituality and social transformation; 2) the internal and external dynamics of love, power, and justice; 3) the nature and role of the church in the work of community; and 4) the distinctive role of black Americans and other ethnic peoples in the realization of community within American society and the world.

By virtue of their conceptions and recommendations, Thurman and King represent two distinct, yet related approaches to the problem of community. Although their approaches differ at important places, the urgent need and mandate for human community was the common goal and labor of their lives. Both insisted that the goal of human community is not merely a utopian ideal, but the very destiny of the human family. They argued that because of the advances in scientific technology, once distant cultures and nations have now become an international neighborhood with fundamental structures of interdependability and interrelatedness. Therefore, human community and international cooperation are no longer options, but vital necessities for continued existence on the planet.

Their recommendations have striking implications for *how* community is actualized. Their treatments of the individual and society and their relationship to God in the actualization of community should not be viewed ultimately as conflictual, but rather as complementary in the creation of human fellowship. Thurman (1979: 255) reflected on this distinction between himself and King:

> Perhaps the ultimate demand laid upon the human spirit is the responsibility to select *where* one bears witness to the Truth of his spirit. The final expression of the committed spirit is to affirm: I choose! and to abide. I felt myself a fellow pilgrim with him and with all the host of those who dreamed his dream and shared this vision.

It is of no small consequence that these two African-American pastors and prophets, out of their oppressed status in this society, searched for a vision of human community which transcended the artificially imposed barriers of race, class, and religious exclusiveness. It is clear that these two faithful pilgrims, like the many witnesses before them, were looking for a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

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