**DSE 8310: The Spirituality of Howard Thurman**

**Oblate School of Theology**

**Spring 2023**

**Instructor:**

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Office hours: by appointment

**Course Description:**

This course is devoted to the spirituality and prophetic witness of Howard Washington Thurman. Variously described as a mystic, prophet, philosopher, theologian, educator, pastor, and mentor to leaders of the civil rights movement, Thurman was one of the most significant 20th century religious figures in the United States. He left a legacy of writings, speeches, and sermons that articulate a spirituality integrating a sophisticated analysis of the inner life, mystical experience, a rich aesthetic of nature, and pointed social criticism on racism, colonialism, nonviolence, human suffering, and resistance to oppression. In this course we will encounter Thurman’s work directly through some of his major writings and sermons. Through a sustained engagement with Thurman’s spiritual and social witness, we will consider how he speaks to our own “inward journeys” and how spirituality and social action are integrated in our lives.

**Objectives:**

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

* Identify and describe the primary themes in Howard Thurman's writings.
* Explain the various religious, theological, social, and political factors that shaped Howard Thurman's theology and spirituality.
* Articulate the enduring influence of Thurman within Christian spirituality
* Articulate the relationship between contemplation and action (or mysticism and social ethics) in the life and work of Thurman *and* articulate their own understanding of contemplation and action: that is, of the relationship between contemplative spirituality and prophetic public witness
* Evaluate whether and how Thurman’s thought might inform the contemporary practice of spirituality and engagement with issues of justice.

**Required Texts:**

* Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1979)
* Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1965)
* Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996)
* Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975)
* Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971)
* Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and Social Witness* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1972)
* Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1963)
* Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet 115, 1961)
* Howard Thurman, *Sermons on the Parables*, edited by David Gowler and Kipton Jensen (Orbis, 2018)
* Howard Thurman, *The Way of the Mystics (Walking with God: The Sermon Series of Howard Thurman)*, edited by Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Fluker (Orbis, 2021)

**Requirements:**

* **Attendance and informed participation**: The heart of any educational experience is the engagement you make with the course content and the conversation in which you participate with your instructor and peers. Since this course will be conducted in both synchronous and asynchronous modes, participation will involve in class discussion and timely submissions to Moodle. Please be in class on time, informed about the day’s subject matter, and ready to contribute your voice. *30% of grade.*
* **Research paper** (around 15 pages, double-spaced) on some aspect of Howard Thurman’s spirituality, theology, and / or ethics.Present a summary in class on April 27 or 28. **Due April 21 (you may submit a revision by May 1)** *40% of grade*
* **Annotated bibliography on secondary works:** Compose an annotated bibliography evaluating secondary works on Howard Thurman. Your bibliography should include at least 4 books and at least 6 articles. Your bibliography should include at least one or two sentences of evaluation of the source. Here is a helpful guide for preparing annotated bibliographies: <https://guides.library.cornell.edu/annotatedbibliography>. **Due May 2** *30% of grade*

\*\*\*All written work is due by the beginning of class on the day indicated.  Your grade *will* suffer if work is late, being counted down one-half grade for *each day* overdue.  ***NO PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED AFTER THREE DAYS: at that point the assignment will receive a zero*** except in cases of documented extenuating circumstances, negotiated in advance.

**Grading scale:**

A=95-100; A-=90-94; B+=87-89; B=83-86; B-=80-82; C+=77-79; C=73-76; C-=70-72; D+=67-69; D=63-66; D-=60-62; F=59 and below.

***Tentative Course Schedule and Readings:***

**January 31: Introducing Howard Thurman (online, asynchronous discussion)**

* **Watch:** Interview with Howard Thurman by Landrum Bolling: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGX4-Wv9UD0>

*Writing prompt:* ***Post on Moodle*** a few observations about what seems significant to you from the interview.

**February 6: Howard Thurman: Life, Context, Influences**

***Read for today:***

* Thurman, *With Head and Heart*
* Gary Dorrien, “Achieving the Black Social Gospel” from *Breaking White Supremacy,* 1-23 (Moodle)

*Writing prompt:* Thurman describes several significant experiences, persons, and events that were impactful on his spiritual life and thought. Describe an experience, event, or encounter with a person that has been impactful on your spiritual life. As you write, imagine this exercise as a part of the composition of your larger spiritual autobiography.

**February 7: Thurman on the Spirituals as spiritual and ethical resources**

***Read for today:***

* Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*

***Watch:***

* Bill Moyers interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon (founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock), "The Songs Are Free." Clip here: <https://gailpellettproductions.com/the-songs-are-free-bernice-johnson-reagon-and-african-american-music/>

***Listen:***

* . . . to a few spirituals. This database is a wonderful resource for learning about the history of the spirituals and for locating performances: [http://spirituals-database.com/spirituals-on-video/#sthash.MhBPUrIT.dpbs (Links to an external site.)](http://spirituals-database.com/spirituals-on-video/#sthash.MhBPUrIT.dpbs)

*Writing prompt:* After reading, listening and watching, choose one of the tunes about which Thurman writes for your focus. A.) identify some basic information about the song (e.g., origin, biblical and theological allusions, themes, meaning, history), at least what can be found; b) summarize Thurman's reflections on the song; c) compare Thurman's reflections with Bernice Johnson Reagon's reflections on the spirituals. Especially, identify how each articulates the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the spirituals.

**February 8: Thurman’s Enduring Classic: *Jesus and the Disinherited***

***Read for today:***

* Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*
* Daniel Elam, “Anticolonialism,” <https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-concepts/anticolonialism>

*Writing prompt:* Analyze the anti-colonial and de-colonial elements of Thurman’s writing thus far. Where do you see the influence of de-colonialism on Thurman, resonances in Thurman’s writing with decolonial thought, and/or anticipations of postcolonial and decolonial thought in *WHaH* and *JaTD*? Importantly, what role does “religion” play in Thurman’s critique of colonialism?

**February 21 (online, asynchronous discussion): On Jesus and citizenship (*Jesus and***

***the Disinherited, continued*)**

***Read:***

* Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (continued)
* Sarah Azaransky, “Citizenship in *Jesus and the Disinherited*: From Black Internationalism to Whiteness on the Contemporary Border.” *Black Theology* 11:3 (2013): 281-304 (Posted on Moodle)

*Writing prompt:* Analyze the theme of "citizenship" in the *Jesus and the Disinherited* and apply Thurman's analysis to contemporary initiatives for racial justice in the U.S.: e.g., BLM, criminal justice and prison reform, environmental justice, racial disparities in COVID-19 rates and care, etc. ***Post to Moodle***

**March 9: Thurman on Mysticism**

***Read:***

* Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*
* Thurman, *The Way of the Mystics*

*\*Note: you can also listen to recordings of the sermons in this volume and many other of Thurman’s sermons in in the “Virtual Listening Room” of the Howard Thurman collection at the Boston University archives:* [*http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room*](http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room)

* David Perrin, “Mysticism,” from Arthur Holder, ed., the *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality,* 442-458(D2L)

*Writing prompt:* How does Thurman define "mysticism?" (or “religious experience”). How does Thurman's account compare with contemporary scholarly understandings of mysticism, as articulated in Perrin's essay? Does Thurman’s account of mysticism resonate with your experience in any way?

**March 10: Mysticism and Social Engagement**

***Read:***

* Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*

*Writing prompt:* Describe how Thurman articulates the relationship between mysticism and social action (this relationship may also be described as “mysticism and social ethics,” “religious experience and social action,” “the inner life and the active life,” or “contemplation and action”). How do *you* understand this relationship in your own life? Do you see anything in Thurman’s account that might inform your understanding of this relationship in your spirituality?

**March 28 (online, asynchronous discussion): On mysticism and Nature**

***Read for today:***

* Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*
* Thurman, “Man and the World of Nature” (Moodle)
* Timothy Robinson, “He Talked to Trees! Thinking Differently About Nature with Howard Thurman,” (Moodle)
* Laurel Kearns, “The Context of Eco-Theology,” from *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology:* <https://users.drew.edu/lkearns/eco-theology.pdf>

*Writing prompt:* Thurman has been called a “nature mystic,” although this is seldom defined or analyzed. Why do you think he has been labeled this way? What are the sources of his thinking about the other-than-human world and the human place in it? In light of Kearns’s overview of the development of eco-theology, what resonances do you see between Thurman’s experience and writing, and eco-theology from the 20th century until now? What contribution do you see Thurman making to contemporary eco-theology and activism? (***Post to Moodle)***

**April 7 (online, asynchronous discussion): Film Review: *Backs Against the Wall: The***

***Howard Thurman Story***

***Watch:***

* *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story,* directed by Martin Doblmeier. available free at Tubitv: <https://tubitv.com/movies/605774/backs-against-the-wall-the-howard-thurman-story?start=true>; also available to rent on Vimeo.

Compose a 300-word reflection on the film. Identify the director’s narrative “hook” and how it is developed. That is, what is the perspective or “angle” from which the director approaches the film? Compare Thurman’s accounts of his life with the depiction in Doblmeier’s film: what does the director emphasize and what does he leave out? What is his perspective on Thurman’s significance? What do you think of his choices and of the film, overall?

**April 27: Thurman and the Bible**

***Read for today:***

* Thurman, *Sermons on the Parables*
* Vincent Wimbush, “The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretive History,” in Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, 81-97 (Moodle)
* Brian Blount, ed. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, chapters on Matthew, Mark, and Luke, *and* at least one other contemporary New Testament commentary on relevant passages

*Writing prompt:* Browse the book *Sermons on the Parables* and choose 3 or 4 sermons on which to focus. After consulting sections in Blount and at least one other commentary that deals with the parables which are the focus for the sermons you choose: a.) identify ways in which Thurman’s preaching reflects and / or diverges from traditions of African American biblical interpretation; b.) evaluate Thurman’s exegetical and interpretive style compared to the contemporary commentaries; c.) offer personal response to one sermon: what intrigues, disturbs, invites, or speaks to you in some way? Does anything in Thurman’s preaching speak to the present cultural moment and how?

**April 28: On segregation, integration, and hope**

***Read:***

* Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*

***Listen:***

* NPR Fresh Air interview with Peniel Joseph, author of *The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.*:[*https://www.npr.org/2020/08/12/901632573/black-power-scholar-illustrates-how-mlk-and-malcolm-x-influenced-each-other*](https://www.npr.org/2020/08/12/901632573/black-power-scholar-illustrates-how-mlk-and-malcolm-x-influenced-each-other)

*Writing prompt*: Thurman critiques “segregation” in *The Luminous Darkness*, advocating a vision of community and reconciliation based on the profound unity of all life and the dignity of each person. Analyze Thurman’s call for “integration” (written in 1965) in light of Joseph’s description of tensions and convergences between Black separatists and Civil Rights leaders calling for reconciliation and integration. How do you imagine Thurman’s vision was received at the time? Do you think that it resonates today?

**May 2: Final Papers Due**