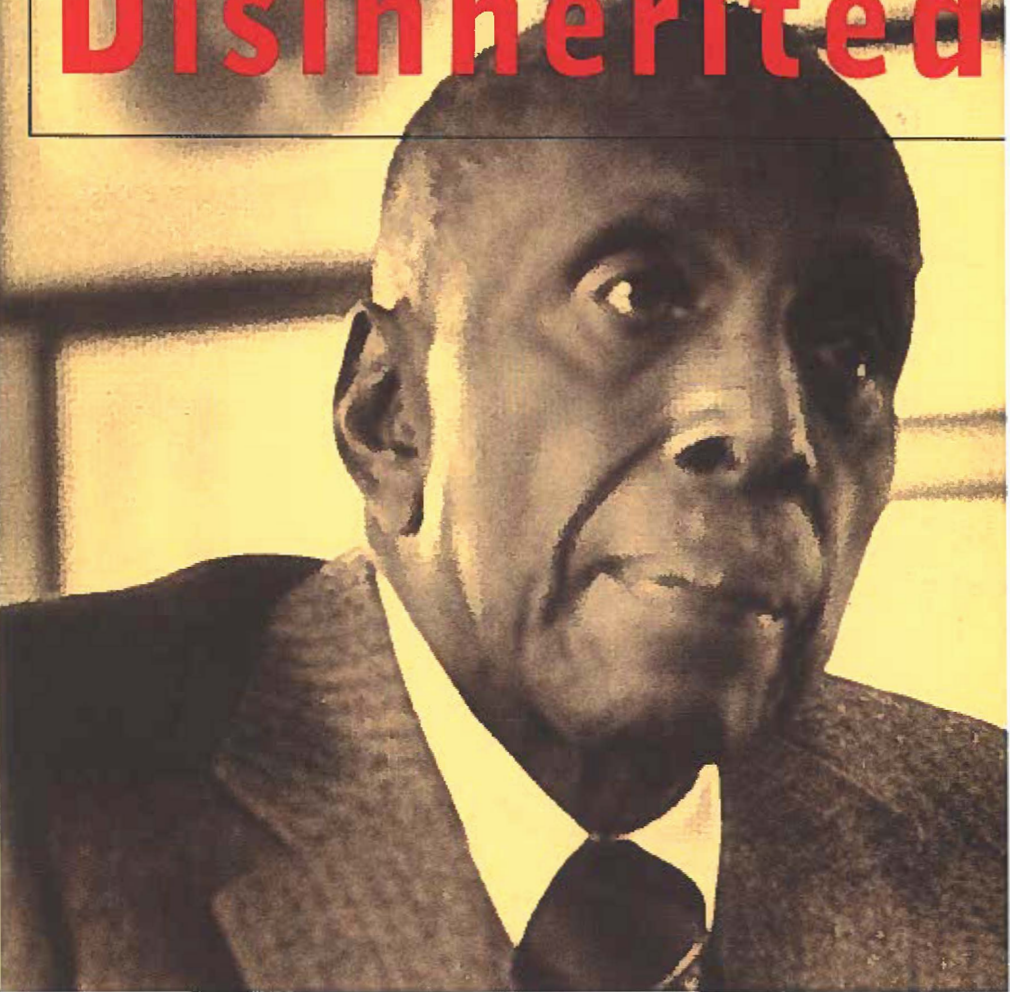


Jesus

and the

Disinherited



HOWARD THURMAN

Foreword by Vincent Harding

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To
My Beloved Daughters
OLIVE and ANNE

and to the future of their generation
in whom the struggles of the
past will find fulfillment

Foreword

A superficial encounter with the title of Howard Thurman's classic statement, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, could easily lead us to anticipate a 1940s version of liberation theology, with its now familiar message that God is on the side of the oppressed, with its powerful and prophetic condemnation of the oppressors and their cruel systems of dehumanization, with its urgent calls to repentance, resistance, and hope. But nothing in Thurman's large and magnificently varied body of work ever yielded itself to superficial readings, and this invaluable half-century-old text is no exception.

For although it is possible to glean elements of a liberation theology from its pages, this richly endowed, seminal work

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character.) At the outset he made it clear that his interest in the issues "has been and continues to be both personal and professional." Born into the Black community of Daytona Beach, Florida, at the beginning of the century, he was carefully nurtured by a maternal grandmother who had come through the fierce crucible of slavery while "leaning on the Lord." So Thurman possessed an intimate knowledge of the harsh contours and consequences of America's walls as well as a profound appreciation for the amazing inner resources of those people who had stood firmly against the hardness without losing their humanity or betraying their souls. And there was never any doubt in his mind that the life and teachings of Jesus, "the poor Jew" of Nazareth, the disinherited, threatened subject of Roman power, were especially relevant to the ever-present contingent of Black men and women who lined the serrated, cutting surfaces of the wall called America. So he could unhesitatingly declare that "the striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who tarries long over the facts."

Thurman had been tarrying over and wrestling with these urgent matters for most of his adult life. He took the concerns with him when he left Florida in 1919 to attend Morehouse College in Atlanta, and was able to discuss them with fellow students such as Martin Luther King, Sr., faculty members such as Benjamin E. Mays and E. Franklin Frazier, and the visionary president of the school, John Hope. The issues and questions were unavoidably on his mind as he moved on to engage the world of white theological education at

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Rochester Theological Seminary in upstate New York. And they were clearly even more crucial to his life in 1935 when, from his important base at Howard University's Rankin Chapel, Thurman published the seven-page essay "Good News for the Underprivileged" in the prestigious ecumenical journal *Religion in Life*. It was that essay that became the essential core of *Jesus and the Disinherited* when the book was first published in 1949.

The post-World War II years were, of course, a crucial transitional period in the history of African-Americans. New beginnings in politics, economics, and human migration were being shaped by and for Black America, and a new contingent of leaders was expressing its determination to break the power of Jim Crow, the legalized—and terrorizing—system of segregation that formed the structural core of America's brutal wall. Thurman and his writings moved regularly, influentially among this group of "New Negroes." At the same time he often served as pastor, preacher, and retreat leader for many of the increasing number of white men and women who sought some source of alliance with the fermenting Black forces.

Crucial to the sense of change that marked the African-American community by the end of the 1940s was its acute awareness of the rising tide of anticolonial struggles that was shaking the foundations of white, Western world hegemony in places such as Africa, India, and Asia. Thurman was a part of all that, and the "Disinherited" of his title was also meant to encompass the colonized peoples beyond these shores. (Indeed, shortly after "Good News for the Underprivileged" was published, Thurman and his gifted soul mate,

wife, and coworker, Sue Bailey Thurman, were visiting with Gandhi in India, seeking to learn from the Mahatma's experiences in spiritually based social struggle and responding to his well-informed questions about the African-American situation.)

When *Jesus and the Disinherited* appeared the Thurmans had already left Howard University, and Howard Thurman was serving as pastor of the nation's first intentionally interracial congregation, the Church for the Fellowship of All People in San Francisco. By that time Thurman had developed an approach to (or better, a relationship with) Jesus of Nazareth that took him beyond the central orthodoxies of American Christianity and, more importantly, was opening the way toward a liberating spirituality that made great demands on what he called the "inward center," the heart and soul of the dispossessed. For the spirituality that emerged and focused itself in *Jesus and the Disinherited* carried an insistent message that life under oppression provided no excuses for avoiding a path of courageous, creative integrity. As a matter of fact, while Thurman wrote with great compassion about the difficulties faced by the marginalized peoples whose lives are constantly besieged by the threatening, destructive power of the dominating forces, still this deeply loving and caring pastor of the dispossessed would not back away from the demands of a life of integrity, a life that refuses to give into "fear, hypocrisy and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited." For he recognized—and he believed Jesus recognized—that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a

people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them.”

In the light of that perspective it was not surprising that Thurman summarized the essential message of Jesus for the disinherited in these words: “You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception and dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea-Nea; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your father who is in heaven.”

Throughout the work Thurman continued to hold his disinherited people to a magnificently (some would say unrealistically—but who defines the *real* within the mystery of “the inward center”?) high set of expectations. If it is true, as some accounts indicate, that Martin Luther King, Jr. often carried a copy of this text on his many journeys, then there are creative connections along the wall that may exceed even our greatest expectations. Of course, considering the generations-long relationships between the King and Thurman families, Martin likely had the message of these pages etched on his heart. It must have provided an important addition to his own resources when Black people constantly raised with him the question that was most directly articulated in the late 1960s by Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Touré), that stalwart of the freedom movement who called the nation’s attention to the bold and desperate cry for Black power. Not long before King’s assassination in 1968 Stokely asked with mock innocence, “Dr. King, why do we have to be more moral than white folks?”

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That question came out of a period when thousands of Black people were leaping away from the American wall and hurling angry, incendiary words and devices into the midst of the nation's life. When I realized that the first paperback edition of this work appeared in 1969, as the Black fires were only beginning to cool down, I wondered whether a contemporary generation of young people might possibly find any space in their lives for the firmly loving disciplines of the spirit that Thurman (and his friend, Jesus) press forward in this gift of a book. Then, just as I moved toward closing my work on this Foreword, I came across another gift, one that seemed to open the possibilities of a connection between Howard Thurman and a new generation of his (and my) children. Again the gift I found was a book, *Testimony*, a moving and impressive collection of essays and poetry edited by Natasha Tarpley and published in 1994. It was written by a group of some forty young African-American writers, most of whom were likely just entering elementary school when Thurman left us in the spring of 1981. What I sensed in their deeply reflective anthology was a level of integrity, self-examination, and social concern that would have brought one of those characteristically broad and deep smiles to the face of our father in the faith. (And when I noted that *Testimony* was also published by Beacon it seemed very likely that our dear mentor was up to one of his familiar creative tricks.)

Surely some of the gifted and committed young people of *Testimony* could find a vital connection with *Jesus and the Disinherited*, even if their walls are different from the ones Thurman and his grandmother knew. That is a cause for

real joy, but much more has changed in this country than the character of the walls and the number of people who now escape their harsh pressures. So any serious reflection on the possible future of this landmark work from the past must take at least two of those essential changes into consideration.

First, we need to recall the fact that in the years when Thurman was most actively wrestling with the issues and spirits that emerged in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the Black people who provided his major points of reference in this country often gathered in and around places and events where Jesus of Nazareth was celebrated and at least nominally recognized and followed. Today, at the close of Thurman's century, those people who live most obviously with their backs against the wall—for instance, the homeless, the working and jobless poor, the substance abused and abusers, the alienated, misguided, and essentially abandoned young people—are rarely within hearing or seeing range of the company of Jesus' proclaimed followers. The keepers of the faith of the master often find it very difficult, and very dangerous, to follow him into the hard places inhabited by the disinherited of America. And those wall-bruised people find no space for their presence in the places where the official followers are comfortably at worship, unless they happen to find themselves among such exceptions as the young, downwardly mobile worker-believers of the Azuza church fellowship in Dorchester, Massachusetts, or the interracial community of hope in Washington, D.C., the Abyssinian Sojourners.

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On an even more complicated level, in this increasingly pluralistic nation Thurman's "religion of Jesus" and its strange mutation, American Christianity, are no longer considered the automatic, official possessors of any privileged monopoly on the truth of God or humanity. So Jesus' guidance for the disinherited may be available only through some direct, creative, perhaps disguised encounters between those whose wounded backs and spirits testify to the continuing reality of the walls and those who may no longer be forcibly pressed against them but who know the walls and the continuing struggle against the hounds of fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, and have determined to overcome. In unofficial, unprivileged, and dangerous encounters at the wall: perhaps that is the way Thurman would prefer us to meet his Jesus at the close of the twentieth century.

Of course, even in his somewhat less complicated time Thurman recognized that it would not be easy to develop models of hope from among the disinherited, and he quickly, quietly declared toward the end of his statement that "A profound piece of surgery has to take place in the very psyche of the disinherited before the great claim of the religion of Jesus can be presented. The great stretches of barren places in the soul must be revitalized, brought to life, before they can be challenged." Fortunately, he lived long enough to encounter a generation of pioneers in the 1960s (some of whom he had helped inspire) that was ready—at least for a time—to break away from the wall and take on the challenge of confrontation, healing, re-creation, and hope for themselves, for the nation, and for the world.

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If he had continued in this life long enough to see Nelson Mandela walk in graceful triumph through the prison gates, away from the walls, Thurman would surely have recognized a living testimony to the power of the human spirit to overcome the hounds of fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, to resist the crippling calls for vengeance. In the light of such a life it may even be possible for us to return to the original 1935 pilot essay, to remember that the revitalization of the souls of the oppressed was never an end in itself for Thurman. For there, at the beginning of this long publishing path, the Black pilgrim reminded us of the larger social purposes of such creative disciplines of the spirit. Overlooking, or forgiving, his heavy tendency toward the male pronouns that were so much a part of his time, we are able to grasp Thurman's grandest contextual goal for the disinherited/underprivileged when he writes:

Often there are things on the horizon that point logically to a transformation of society, especially for the underprivileged, but he cannot co-operate with them because he is spiritually and intellectually confused. He mistakes fear for caution and caution for fear. Now, if his mind is free and his spirit unchained, he can work intelligently and courageously for a new day.

With Mandela as the great model of the unchained co-creator of a new day, with Malcolm as a suggestion of other liberated possibilities beyond the wall, beyond the chains, it is possible now to return to Stokely Carmichael's earlier question, and to recognize how crucial Thurman's work, Mandela's work, and Fannie Lou Hamer's work are to a full response. For such lives remind us that the ultimate issue is

not being more moral than white folks, but becoming more free than we have ever been, free to engage our fullest powers in the transformative tasks that await us at the wall. As women and men moving toward our wholeness (our holiness?), we meet Thurman and the young people who are developing their *Testimony*. We meet Ella Baker and her Dorchester-loving children of Azuza. We meet countless others whose names and faces we have not seen, but know are real. We join our best young lives and rendezvous with Thurman, with his Jesus, and with all our departed and still-present veterans of the struggle for a new day. Finding unexpected companions everywhere (including at a Million Man March) whose backs and spirits will not be broken, whose lives are free to create new life, we discover why we must be more disciplined in love, integrity, and hope than anyone ever dreamed. There are new worlds to build, new visions to carry forward, new companions at the wall, new days to begin. Good morning, Howard Thurman.

A postmodern and postindustrial American postscript: Although Thurman's message of the 1940s was focused on the needs of the Black representatives of the disinherited in the United States, by the last half of the final decade of the twentieth century it is clear that his message is now replete with significance for many other people as well. Latinos, Native Americans, Southeast Asians, and many women and gay and lesbian people are only the most obvious additions to Thurman's community of the wall. For the pressures of the postindustrial capitalist world order have pushed many other people against a great variety of unfamiliar and unexpected walls

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(and glass ceilings), and we are all hounded by the inner demons of fear, hypocrisy, and hatred. So Thurman must be taken very seriously when he still offers this work "for those who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity." Shall we gather at the wall?

VINCENT HARDING

Preface

THE significance of the religion of Jesus to people who stand with their backs against the wall has always seemed to me to be crucial. It is one emphasis which has been lacking—except where it has been a part of a very unfortunate corruption of the missionary impulse, which is, in a sense, the very heartbeat of the Christian religion. My interest in the problem has been and continues to be both personal and professional. This is the question which individuals and groups who live in our land always under the threat of profound social and psychological displacement face: Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself? The question is searching, for the dramatic demonstration of the impotency of Christianity in dealing with the issue is underscored by its apparent inability to cope with it within its own fellowship.

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I do not pretend that I have found an answer in the pages that follow; but I am deeply convinced that in the general area of my inquiry is to be found the answer without which there can be little hope that men may find in Christianity the fulfillment which it claims for its gospel.

It was in 1935, at the annual convocation of preaching at the School of Theology of Boston University, that I first gave formal shape to the basic idea in this study. Under the title "Good News for the Underprivileged," it was published as an article in *Religion in Life*, Summer, 1935. Subsequently the same ideas were developed in a prose poem on Jesus, "The Great Incarnate Words," which appeared in the magazine *Motive* in January, 1944. Later this prose poem was published as a part of a volume of poetic meditations under the title *The Greatest of These*. The comprehensive study of which this book is the full development was presented as the Mary L. Smith Memorial Lectures at Samuel Huston College, Austin, Texas, in April, 1948.

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HOWARD THURMAN