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Commonality between the Rhetoric of Reverend Howard Thurman and Reverend Harold Turner

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Abstract

This report addresses commonality between the rhetoric of Reverend Howard Thurman and Reverend Harold Turner insofar as both of them aligned with Martin Luther King's stated preference to avoid emotionalism with his presentations. This analysis focuses on the speaking and writing of both Thurman and Turner. The conceptual centering on rhetoric is used in this study as means to provide academic grounding for the analysis. This serves to help frame the rhetorical practices of Thurman and Turner.

The topic of this report focuses on a statement in *African-American Religion* by Timothy Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau. It has to do with Dr. Martin Luther King being uncomfortable with emotional emphasis in Christian oratory. I did not expect to see such an assertion in that I think of King as being representative of well-known African-American Christian orators. This led to my desire to focus on such rhetorical discourse and representative African-American orators that have not stressed emotional tenor in their delivery.

I pursued this inquiry with two general framing constructs in mind: 1) I aimed to focus on representative African-American rhetoricians from the 20th century and 2) I used the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University as means for gauging the relevance of the African-American scholars that I was considering. There were total of 247 relevant titles. I considered these 247 titles and other relevant materials located at Howard University. The Howard University collection has one of the most significant collections of African-American literature in the world. [1]

Regarding my aforenoted desire to focus on African-American rhetoricians I chose Howard Thurman in relation to his revered reputation and my view of him as a soft-spoken person. Acknowledging Thurman's status as a mystic and a prophet is key to understanding his ideas and interpretations. Luther Smith addresses this in his book *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet.* In doing so Smith frames what is meant by being a prophet. "It will prove more useful to speak of him (Thurman) as an American prophet. . . . Prophets are products of their culture, speaking to specific traditions, problems and purposes of their culture. Their warnings and urgings deal with particular crises of their particular age."[2] This explanation helps to clarify how Thurman maintained insights that were beyond normal applications of rationality but still grounded in a sense of logic that is within the realm of explanation.

His description of Thurman's mystic capabilities often goes beyond rational explanation. "Thurman's earliest contact with mysticism was through mystical experiences. . . . he mentions mystical experiences with nature. . . .(a) Presence that spoke to him without a voice, revealed itself to him without a vision. It included an oak tree to which he talked over all his troubles."[3] Thurman's practices in this regard clearly places him outside of the norm but being outside of the norm is not always problematic. It is merely uncommon. I can deduce how his abilities as a prophet could concurrently complement his functioning as a mystic.

"Thurman's witness offers new credibility to religious liberalism and mysticism as systems of thought which are useful in the development of a theology which speaks to the conditions of Blacks in America."[4] This phrasing "systems of thought" implies a patterned line of processing rather than mere serendipitous occurrences. The phrase "conditions of Blacks in America" is also rich with meaning and should not be assumed to be readily understood by the non-Black population. Unique conditions will certainly produce unique

1 *Congressional Record*, (November 21, 1989).

2 Luther Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Meeting, 2007) 19.

3 Ibid, 174.

4 Ibid, 207.

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systems of thought. Thurman was unique in his maintaining a critical position toward the Christian church. This posture is fully understandable. In his autobiography he explains his perspective. This underscores his critical position toward the institution of Christianity while strongly embracing the teachings of Jesus.

William Apel explains "Thurman embraced a revolutionary gospel"[5] and this involved his aligning with people who existed in the margins of society. As such, Thurman stakes claim to his bold position against the status quo often found in White Christian churches of his time by putting the world on notice that Jesus stands with the oppressed. Apel elaborates in saying Thurman purported that African-Americans needed to represent their perspective using their own point of view.[6] Thus, Thurman proclaims the Christian church is negligent and the African-American community is fully correct in standing up for themselves in word and in deed.

He elaborates on this painful segregated existence that seemingly hammers away at the sense of self. He explains how this phenomenon can be distilled down to be a matter of self-rejection."[7] To despise oneself is a burden that is practically beyond measure. The far reaching effects of such a view would extend toxicity into every facet of life, death and in between. I cannot imagine socializing a child into such a framework in any way that would not dilute the soul.

I was struck by Thurman's description of the White population that bordered his world. "They were not hated particularly; they were not essentially despised; they were simply out of bounds."[8] This description is riddled with features that connote dehumanization. When relations are so poor that the other is not really recognized as being human. I cannot speculate on where one goes from such a posture. This state of affairs reveals how both sides of the fence, the oppressed and the oppressors, suffer a costly penalty that taints the soul.

The American culture offers a continually changing framework of variables that parallel a moving constellation of stars. Thurman is such a star in that constellation, albeit a bright star at that. Still there are other stars in the constellation that provide context for understanding the continuing relevance of Thurman's views. A question that has come to my mind has to do with how much Thurman contrasted with and/or affirmed the views of other African-Americans of his day and soon after. My reading of works by and about Howard Thurman prompted my curiosity in relation to his rhetorical essence being, in my view, limited with regard to degrees of emotionalism.

For my other African-American rhetorician I chose to focus on Reverend Harold Turner who I heard speak many times during my youth and young adulthood. His presentations of self, both in and out of the pulpit, were void of expressions that might imply emotionalism.I had the opportunity to observe him closely and interact with him. We knew each other well. He was my cabin counselor at a church camp I have participated with since I was ten years old. Our relationship continued from the time I was in sixth grade until his death. He was a softspoken person and (in my view) representative of African-American ministers in the central Ohio area during the period he lived (1927-2022).

Reverend Turner was the minister of Second Community Church (part of the ICCC in Columbus, Ohio) during my youth. His church and other ICCC community churches aligned themselves with the Gahanna Community Church Camp each summer. Reverend Turner was actively involved with the ICCC and periodically authored essays that were published in the ICCC newspaper.

Reverend Harold Turner died at age 94 having lived between 1927-2022 . He was born in Weirton, West Virginia where he graduated from Steubenville High School in 1946. After high school he went to work in the Weirton Steel plant in West Virginia and supplemented his income as a jazz musician. His eventual enrollment at Ohio University was cut short when he was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Korean War. He married in 1952 and was father to two sons and one daughter. Reverend Turner built a career at the Defense Construction Supply Center in Columbus, Ohio where he retired in 1981.

He graduated from Ohio Dominican College in 1977 with a degree in Sociology and completed an M.Div. from a Methodist seminary in Ohio. He functioned as leader of Second Community Church in Columbus, Ohio during the 1960's-1980's and then as minister of the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church in Delaware, Ohio after completion of his Master of Divinity degree. He retired from the ministry in 2000 and during retirement was active with the St. Paul AME Church in Columbus, Ohio.

During my youth I observed how Second Community Church was more integral to the existence of the African-American kids than the Gahanna Community Church was for me. Reverend. Turner was the leader of the Second Community Church and he exemplified this function. This was very much commensurate with the point of view expressed by Henry Louis Gates. Gates explained how Black churches became involved with providing guidance in many domains of the Black existence. These domains included educational, social, political and economic issues. [9] I do not know if this has continued to be the case but it certainly was evident 50 years ago.

5 William Apel, "Mystic as Prophet: The Deep Freedom of Thomas Merton and Howard Thurman," The Merton Annual 16 (2003) 179.
6 Ibid, 176.
7 Ibid, 42.
8 Ibid, 18.

9 Henry Louis Gates. The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song (New York: Penguin Press, 2021) 95.

Racial integration that was underway in the 1960's and 1970's presented Reverend Turner with scenarios whereby he guided children of his church and community through the new social contexts that involved interfacing with people and circumstances outside of the African-American community. Our church camp was such a new social context. This phenomenon has been affirmed by Milton Sernett when he explained that Black churches must include emphasis on implementation. [10]

Evelyn Brooks describes the role of respectability within this context. The political dimension of respectability stresses notions of individual presentation as being an objective and as a stand alone matter. [11]The ICCC provided a context for this politics of respectability to evolve. Reverend Turner helped his church navigate these waters via their relationship within the ICCC camp community. I observed that he did it with grace.

His articles in *The Christian Community* (newspaper of the ICCC) cover a range of topics. A 1975 essay stresses the varied backgrounds and experiences that come together under the auspices of the ICCC organization.[12] In doing so he focuses on the benefits to be recognized from the common ground we share. A 1976 article describes approaches for assessing a seminarian's fit for a life of ministry.[13] This type of topic is common in *The Christian Community* insofar as church governance issues are relevant to ICCC functioning. In a 1977 commentary piece Reverend Turner emphasizes how the ICCC needs guiding principles to operate by to avoid becoming irrelevant.[14] This topic was particularly relevant during that period in the life of the ICCC in that there were governance transitions underway.

In 1981 he wrote a two-part position statement on evangelism that was featured in successive issues of *The Christian Community*. The first installment highlights that the word evangelism is not found in the New Testament but that the spirit of evangelism exists in relation to the lives of Jesus and His disciples. Evangelism is not something you do but is something you are in relationship to others.[15] In his follow-up article Reverend Turner discusses why the unchurched are not motivated to attend church and he speculates about steps that can be considered in addressing that situation.[16] Altogether, what he presents in these two articles serves to provide foundation for understanding evangelism concerns within the ICCC.

It is interesting to note that he never addresses relations between African-Americans and European-Americans in his writings that I was able to access. Similarly, in the 20+ years I participated with Reverend Turner in our church camp setting I have no memory of him ever speaking to the camp about relations between Blacks and Whites. During the final years of his life I spent time with him and we visited about such relations as context for the camp events we shared. I found that when I queried him he had related experiences that he was able to frame within the context of varied scenarios we discussed.

One can recognize via the findings presented in this report that rhetorical discourse functions practiced by leaders in the African-American church offer insights with regard to how emotional tenor can be a factor in delivery. As such we can observe how emotional tenor is couched within other rhetorical elements that frame the exchange of information and correlated emotional concerns. It involves a continually evolving constellation of variables.

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