Senior Essay

CRITIQUE OF THE DOCTRINE
OF MAN AS FOUND IN THE THEOLOGY
OF HOWARD THURMAN

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I. Man As A Child Of God

Let us take a critical look at the Doctrine of Man as found in the writing of a black theologian, Howard Thurman.

As one reads the work of Thurman, he must ever be aware that in presenting the doctrine, Thurman is greatly influenced by racial background. Basically, his writings reflect problems that are more commonly the lot of the black man.

Now, let us state what his doctrine is. The discussion of the doctrine would not be given systematically. Using the theme that was often used by the black slave preachers in this country, Thurman seems to be convinced that Blacks are definitely created in the image of God. They are neither slaves nor 'niggers,' but God's children. As children of God, all men are of value and worth in the sight of the Heavenly Father.

As a man, no one happened; he was born; he has a name; he has forebearers; he is the product of a particular culture; he has a mother tongue; he belongs to a nation; he is born into some kind of faith. Also, he must live in two worlds, one that is outside of him and one that is very private. In addition to these qualities, he must also decide what he as an individual would give the greatest allegiance to in life. He must decide for himself to what extent he will live in each of the two worlds.

II. Man As A Creator

Man as a child of God is also a creator. For like God, he has the power to create. One must be careful not to assume that man has the ability to create the things that God himself has made. By this I mean, that man has not been able to create life as we know
it, but he has been given a mind and the ability to reason. Using
his God given abilities, man has already been able to conquer and
make constructive use of most of his environment. Often he is
able to use things just as nature has left them but at times, he
decides that an additional purpose could be served as a result of
a little changing or adjusting of things on his own part. It is
assumed that man has received this ability as the result of the
unique relationship that he has with God. The ability is also
seen as one works out for himself what he will do with his life.
This may be considered as creative in the sense that man decides
for himself what things he will adopt and what things he will reject.
The power that has been given to man by God to rule over the things
that He created also add to man's creativity in that no set pattern
was given, but man had to work out some kind of a system by which
they would be governed. Often this was done through trial and
error in that man not being divine as God made many mistakes that
had to be altered or changed completely. As a result of later de-
velopments which provided that things that we once thought to be
the best were not always so.

Man's life must be fashioned. However, in the process,
it is quite possible that two men born of the same parents, brought
up in the same environment, steeped in the same culture and inspired
by the same faith, may be entirely different. Their fashions of life
may have taken them poles apart.

Hence, in these ways of attempting to change or alter his
environment so that it may be more usable to him, man shows his
ability to create.
III. Emotional Qualities of Man

Now, there are many types of emotional qualities that one finds in man. Man has not been created in a manner that would prohibit his response to certain conditions that may develop. Among these emotional qualities, the highest, if it could be called such, is the one that is also possessed by God, namely love. Man is convinced that God Himself loves him. He has a need that can only be met through love. God Himself has commanded man that they must love one another. The basis upon which relationships of love are built must be developed at an early age. The emotional relationship of a small child to his parents is one of importance to his development in two respects. One is that the childish love is the pattern for all later love relationships. The second is that the ability to love has to be learned and practiced. If these relationships are missing during childhood, all of the later relationships will develop weakly and will remain shallow.

When one becomes an adult, these relationships appear in the anxiety that one has to be understood and accepted on the basis of his worth without any consideration of what he does or does not do. He has a desire to be accepted as himself without any extras. Man simply must feel that he counts and is needed.

In the experience between man and God, he pictures God as One who comforts, wipes away tears and is a personal friend and daily companion. Thus, man feels that because of what God does for him, He must respond out of love. As Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for thyself and our souls are restless till they find rest in thee."
As a result of the encounter with God, man knows that he must love his fellowmen also. Man strives to love the pattern of life that was established by Jesus and must be constantly aware that vengeance belongs to God. We must, as Jesus has commanded us, love even our enemies.

By nature love loves. It is something that has no standard of merit or demerit nor does it seek to give balance to giving and receiving. It possesses a robust vitality which quickens the roots of personality, thereby creating an unfolding of the self that redefines, reshapes, and makes all things new. The experience of love is one that completely changes a person.

Another emotional quality possessed by man is fear. Man often suffers from unpleasant emotional conditions caused by anticipation or awareness of danger. Fear may also be the result of profound reverence and awe especially toward God.

In the former use of the word fear, Thurman deals specifically with what he calls the disinherited people. Fear has its roots deep in the heart of the relations between the weak and the strong, between the controllers of environment and those who are controlled by it. Thurman feels that certain persons are fearful due to the threats of violence that they are often exposed to. In societies, there are usually certain people or groups that have definite advantages over others due to the amount of power that they possess. Those who represent the disinherited are not prepared to defend themselves and thus, they are often threatened with actual physical violence. Thus, the disinherited are threatened with death as well as being
humiliated with the possibility of dying without having served a purpose. This experience usually attacks the fundamental sense of self-respect and dignity, without which a man is not a man.

In an attempt to avoid this physical punishment often disinherited would adopt such patterns of life that would be acceptable by the group that is in power and thus reduce the threat of violence. This was often the case among Negro slaves. They knew what not to do before the slave master.

The second type of fear is that which a man has toward God. Some men are able to realize that man is not to be feared, but that fear must come as a result of our lowliness in the presence of God. They recognized that as children of God, a scale of value becomes available by which men are measured and their true significance determined. Before God, the disinherited has a very basic question that he must answer, namely "Who am I?" As he attempts to answer this question he finds and evaluates his personal achievements and ability. Realizing that he is a child, man should become stabilized and should seek to develop a sense of dignity by which he could appraise his intrinsic powers, gifts, talents and ability. Also before God, man realizes how powerless he really is and often he tends to please God above everything and sometimes even begin to worship Him.

The emotional quality of fear often leads man into deception. Deception is the technique by which the weak have protected themselves against the strong. Man has accepted this principle

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from other organisms of nature. He sees how many organisms are made, so that their bodies are just about the same color as their environment enabling them to blend in the surroundings as a method of protection. Man begins to notice this pattern as little children and is able to use it quite effectively.

An example of deception may be found in the use of "double talk" by the prophet, Ezekiel, as he spoke to the children of Israel who were captives in Babylon. He was quite successful in putting his words into the mouths of others. He conveyed his message to the Jews in a manner that was understood by them, but not by the officials of Babylonia. Examples of this "double talk" may be found in Ezekiel 12:1-20; 15:1-8; 16:1-63; 17:1-21 and 19:1-14.

Still, another deception example is found in this country during the period of slavery. The black slave preachers often conveyed his message to the slaves in the presence of whites, who attended their services, in the form of prayer to God. That which could not be said directly to the people because of the presence of whites was told to God. Some of the spirituals of the slaves were also one of the more effective means of communication in the master's presence. Included among these spirituals are: "Let My People Go;" "My Lord Delivered Ole' Daniel;" "Who Locked de Lion's Jaw;" "Children, We Shall Be Free;" and "Steal Away."

However, as man practices deception he must be careful and not let it get the best of him. For instance, a man who lies constantly has a tendency to become a liar, but he must be able to distinguish when to tell the truth and when not to tell it. This is a very effective way of protecting oneself, as long as one is
able to do it without getting caught.

Still, another type of emotional quality found in man is hatred. Hatred is an intense hostility and aversion usually deriving from fear, anger or a sense of injury. It may also be a very strong dislike or antipathy. Hatred is something that often develops among groups of people who are oppressed and feel that they are not being treated fairly. The bad thing about hatred is that during time of war or national disturbance, many of the leaders and, at times, even the church supports it.

Also, at times, hatred becomes a device by which an individual seeks to protect himself against moral disintegration. At this level man does to other human beings what he could not ordinarily do to them without losing his self-respect. Often this is done merely to please ones own associates.

Hatred has a tendency to dry up the springs of creative thought in the hater and thus makes him starve to death. Hatred means death to the spirit, death to the mind and even death to the communion that one has with God. If any degree of validity could be given to the above affirmations, one can see that it is of great necessity that hatred in all forms be avoided.

Closely associated with these emotional qualities, if not one, is suffering. Suffering is the state or experience of one that suffers. It is a quality that is universal for mankind in that no one escapes from it. It touches all; wise and foolish, literate and illiterate, saint and sinner. Man has made several attempts to escape it, but none of them have been successful in that they
were not able to eliminate the problem.

Suffering is very important in that it humiliates and violates the person and at times, even the very dignity of the human spirit. At the same time, it is also personal in that it affects the individual himself. The setting in which suffering occurs is the very world in which we live.

Suffering is also a form of physical pain and here it finds its roots. In places where there is no experience of pain, there can be no suffering. Pain may be at both levels where we can explain it as well as at places where we can not interpret the purpose nor the fact of pain. Physical pain is fundamental to man's experience as a creature. It is used to serve as a signal of death or a reminder that all is not well. For example, pain sends a man to the doctor and as long as he is in pain, he knows that his body is not functioning as it should.

Affiliated with suffering is the question, why? Man often asks this question. He wonders if suffering is the result of some misdeed that he has done. It is very difficult to answer, but man finds strength in the fellowship with God to look beyond it. For many individuals to know God in the fellowship of his suffering is to be transformed by the glory of his life.

Hence, the discussion of the emotional qualities of man is brought to a close having looked at love, fear, hatred and suffering and how they affect man.

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3 Ibid., pp. 82-84.
IV. Abilities Or Features Of Man

Let us now turn to some of the other abilities or features that man possesses or by which he may be characterized. The discussion will proceed with a brief look at hope. Hope is a desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment. Man constantly lives with the expectation that his present lot would improve in the future. They look to receive more out of this present life than what they presently receive. And where this is not possible, they look to the eternal life in hope of finding fulfillment. The best example of this is also to be found among the slaves. Many knew that slavery was definitely wrong and felt that it was against the will of God. Realizing that many of them would be killed in attempts to escape, they were able to face the present moment by looking to the time they would go home to live with God. This hope for fulfillment is expressed in many of the spirituals. Man looks to God and hopes that He will intervene in his behalf. Man is never satisfied and is always looking for more.

Still, another feature which characterizes man is his expectation for reconciliation. This expectation may be classified along with hope. Reconciliation means to be restored to friendship, harmony, or communion. Reconciliation is necessary because the friendship among men is something that is often broken. Evidence of this concern is found in the expression of human desire to understand others and to be understood by others. When there is disunity among men, the individual can not experience his own

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Thurman, op. cit., p. 83.
self as a unity and his life may become deeply fragmented and splintered. Often one loses his sense of identity as a result of this disturbance.

Reconciliation is also necessary in the relationship between God and man. For this relationship has become estranged as a result of man's action. For the religious man, reconciliation can not be separated from his religious experience. In the religious experience, man has a sense of being touched at his innermost center and this awareness sets in motion the process that makes for his integration or wholeness. Here he recognizes his true self. Since God works to redeem man, He is charged with the responsibility of keeping the way open so that He and His Father may have free and easy access to each other.

Growing out of this religious experience, one develops a sense of ethical imperatives which he must abide by. These imperatives are to be kept on the level of relationship with one's fellowmen. In the words of a poet, "no man is an island." The implications are that one man can not live by himself isolated from those around him.

Still, another quality by which man may be characterized is his ability to commit himself to things. Commitment is an agreement or pledge to do something in the future. A man becomes energized by the living spirit of the living God, When he makes a deliberate self-conscious intention to offer himself to God.

In the process of commitment, man cooperates with the Spirit of God by making himself open and available to it. This

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5 Thurman, op. cit., pp. 121-123.
experience is often given the name conversion. It signifies that there was a moment in the life of an individual when he felt himself convicted of sin. At the height of this crisis he was able, by the grace of God, to renounce his past life and accept his spirit. For most men this was the encounter with the living Christ. The moment of conversion serves as both a point of referral for subsequent life as well as the basis for integrated behavior. Here something is established which the individual can look back to when lost.

Commitment comes when one totally consents to give in and a new process is initiated into one's life. Commitment releases vast creative energies in the individual that enable him to meet the specific demands of the new life.

And yet, another quality of man is his growth. Growth is the ability to increase in size by addition of material, either through assimilation into the living organism or by accretion in a natural inorganic process. It may also be defined as development in the life of an organism. There are several ways in which a man grows. For instance, as it was said about Jesus, one thinks that man also is to increase in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.

Growth is becoming aware of the self as self. This awareness is rooted in the experience of the body. There is a relationship between the growth of the body and that of the mind. However, the relationship is not clearly known. One's due to think creatively is the discovery that thought is private and that there is a world of meanings, feelings, and ideas that belong
Growing is also the experience of crisis. It is a form of tension, in that it is created by two forces making contradictory demands simultaneously. When the tension reaches a certain degree of strain, the entire life is held in precarious balance. It is only resolved when one impulse or the other is victorious.

An increase in wisdom and stature can mean a growth in the knowledge of God and an understanding of His Kingdom. Thus, we are taught by Jesus Himself that if we seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, all other things will be given to us.

Hence, our discussion of features or abilities which man possesses or by which he may be characterized is brought to a close, having taken a brief look at hope, reconciliation, commitment and growth as they relate to man.

V. Additional Needs Of Man

Now, let us shift to a discussion of some of the needs of man. There are many needs that a man has. Very high on the list would be the need to develop a sense of self. It is very important that a man must develop a sense of self because his dignity lies herein. A sense of self is the result of the quest for stability which one pursues against a background of threatening confusion and is impelled by a desire for personal morale.

It is essential that every man establishes for himself the lines along which he proposes to live his life. He must answer such questions as, "Who am I?" and "What do I wish to do?" He must develop a pattern wherein he will know how he would
handle himself in different situations. Knowing what method to use at the right time is a sign of wisdom.

The key to the meaning of life is found within each man. This is a principle that was used by Jesus Himself. The responsibility for living with meaning and dignity can never be finally taken away from the individual. Man is truly affected by both heredity and his environment but the judgment which he passes upon life and by which life weighs him in the balance, finds its key within the individual and not outside of him.

As man develops a sense of self he faces a continuous selective process wherein he must choose the options that will make possible the largest fulfillment of his own life as well as those who share his expression. In this selective process one must be very careful to select for himself those things that he considers in others.

Furthermore, man has several needs that he must solve only in his relations with God. For example, he has the need to submit himself to a Being that is greater than he and can help him when his own attempts seem to be of no avail. As man realizes that his powers are limited, he reaches out in hope of meeting the Divine. In this experience he hopes to find an additional sense of direction. Often in this experience a man loses himself completely but he is assured by the promise of Jesus that the man who loses his life for my sake shall find it. This statement seems to be a paradox but man accepts the promise of Jesus on the basis of his faith.

Man has a pattern of life that was established by Jesus Himself. Those who surrender themselves to God strive to live
according to that pattern. As he follows the pattern he is brought to a level of physical needs.

Just as man has an urge to be in relationship with the Divine, he also has needs that are to be solved in encounters with his fellowmen. By nature, man is a social being. He was created to live in a community. This is seen clearly when we notice how he tends to move around in groups not feeling quite the same when not in the presence of others. Every man is concerned about community. There is a persistent strain in the human spirit that rejects the experience of isolation as being alien to its genius. One is not to get the idea that there is no time when a man enjoys being by himself, because he certainly does.

In order for a community to develop it is essential to have a common understanding of life, a common faith and also a common commitment. Man can not be indifferent to men. The human race can not be ignored by the individual man. This urge in man which drives him toward relations with others is the very point at which community begins.

Hence, we now bring to a close the discussion of the needs of man. By nature, man must develop a sense of self and must have relationships with both God and his fellows.

VI. Critical Comments

Now, let us conclude our paper with the critical remarks of the present writer about the works of Howard Thurman as they relate to the doctrine of man. The doctrine as found in the works of Thurman is definitely biblical. He often uses the
Scripture as support for the statements that he makes. It has been stated earlier that the works are definitely colored by the background of the author. Being a Negro, he is greatly concerned about what the Bible has to say to the Black Man. However, most, if not all, of what he says about man can be applied to mankind.

Furthermore, his works include the philosophical view of man, in that he has taken into consideration such things as the kinds of causes (Aristotle) and forms (Plato). Also evidence of the doctrine of temperaments may be seen as you examine the different situations of man and check into their pattern of response.

Then again, his ideas about man are easily grasped as one reads his works. However, there I feel is not what may be considered a systematic view. One must be fair and admit that he had not set out to give a systematic study of a man in the books that were used as the sources for this discussion.

Still again, the works of Thurman tend to be somewhat repetitious in that the very same illustrations are found in several of his books. One may feel that at certain places he just copied entire paragraphs from an earlier work. However, with much discussion about a "Black Theology" using the definition that Preston Williams gives (an attempt to explain the works of Jesus as it relates to the Black Man), the works of Thurman may be an excellent place to start in the writing of a "Black Theology."

And still again, the works of Thurman reflect the thoughts of one who has spent a great deal of time in meditation and prayer. For in his meditations one finds a great deal of food
for thought. They have been carefully worked out.

Now, that the Doctrine of Man has been presented as found in Thurman's theology and the author's critical comments have been given, we conclude this discussion.
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