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Rufus Jones and Howard Thurman

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This article connects ideas developed by the prominent Quaker theologian, mystic, and social activist Rufus Jones and his student, the prophetic Howard Thurman. It examines what affirmation mysticism means in Jones' theology and in his social action and considers what Howard Thurman saw in Jones' autobiography, *Finding the Trail of Life*. The article considers what that merit was and how Jones' silence in addressing racial conflict ultimately disappointed Thurman. Testimony invokes a dramatic turn. If it is possible to imagine a dramatically different conversation between Jones and Thurman, it may also be possible to imagine Spirit calling us to live in a different way.

A dramatic investigation into the kind of imagination that Rufus Jones might have been lacking, the active ignorance that made the essential conversation impossible, concludes the article.



Introduction

This article connects ideas developed by the prominent Quaker theologian, mystic, and social activist Rufus Jones and his student, the prophetic Howard Thurman. It examines what affirmation mysticism means in Jones' theology and in his social action and considers what Howard Thurman saw in Jones' autobiography, *Finding the Trail of Life*.¹ The connection matters because the concept of affirmation mysticism is picked up in Thurman's consideration of spiritual disciplines and his struggle to overcome hatred and segregation. There is much in common between the two men's conceptions of Spirit. Jones' commitment to work for peace and reconciliation is an expression of his affirmation mysticism, a term he coined. Similarly, Thurman's social witness is intimately connected to his understanding of how Spirit and Love work in the world. Jones was not, however, a consistent partner in resolving the systemic racism that prompted Thurman to pose his haunting question, 'How does the human spirit accommodate itself to desolation'?² Nevertheless, Thurman found something of merit in the Quaker's thinking and was able to turn it to his own use. The article considers what that merit was and how Jones' silence in addressing racial conflict ultimately disappointed Thurman.

Finally, the article concludes with a dramatic investigation into the kind of imagination that Rufus Jones might have been lacking, the active ignorance embedded in liberal white theology that made the essential conversation impossible. Rebecca Chopp tells us that the work of testimony and liberation requires doing theology in new ways.³ Testimony invokes a dramatic turn. Indeed, drama has been a significant tool in shaping the moral imagination of communities for millennia. Pointing to just a few stars in the galaxy, Aristotle, Plato, Tolstoy, Boal, and Fanon have all written on the pedagogical implications of dialogue and drama.⁴ Indeed, theory, theatre, and *theos*, thus theology, appear to share a common etymological root, *the-*, meaning to gaze at or to look at in order to understand. If it is possible to imagine a dramatically different conversation between Jones and Thurman, it may also be possible to imagine Spirit calling the beneficiaries and victims of white supremacy to live in a different way.

Rufus Jones and Affirmation Mysticism

The prominent Quaker theologian, educator, and activist Rufus M. Jones (1863–1948) grew up in rural Maine in a conservative Quaker family in which he learned that 'true

¹ Jones, R. M., *Finding the Trail of Life*, New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1926.

² Thurman, H., *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1965, p. 28.

³ Chopp, R., *The Praxis of Suffering*, Religion Online, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986, p. 203.

⁴ For an elaboration of this argument, see: Hall, B. W., 'Teaching with Theory Plays: The Example of the Ozone Layer in Renewing a Common World', in Maniates, M. (ed), *Encountering Global Environmental Politics: Teaching, Learning, and Empowering Knowledge*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

religion' and good works went together hand in glove.⁵ Believing that 'the only possible way to overcome the world is to carry the forces of the spiritual life into the veins of society until peace and love and righteousness prevail there', he established the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1915 with other pacifists.⁶ Two years later he helped to found the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). Jones and other Quakers initially created the AFSC to provide alternative service for Quaker pacifists, conscientious objectors to war.⁷ During Jones' lifetime, the organisation worked to rebuild war-torn countries, feed and clothe hungry children in Europe and Appalachia, and, during World War II, set up the first Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps for conscientious objectors, and created a short-lived interracial program.⁸ Shortly after World War II and one year before his death, Rufus Jones accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of AFSC with his colleague Henry Cadbury 'for their pioneering work in the international peace movement and compassionate effort to relieve human suffering, thereby promoting the fraternity between nations'.⁹

Jones' mysticism, affirmative, communal, and organic, was the *sine qua non* of his social action. He coined the phrase 'affirmation mysticism' to distinguish his understanding of the sacred in daily life from 'negation mysticism'.¹⁰ By this he meant that 'immediate awareness of relation with God, direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence', was experienced by engagement with the world, not apart from it.¹¹ Moreover, as human beings, we are already connected in a relationship with Spirit or the Inner Light or the Beyond Within (Jones used many terms interchangeably). There is no sense in which we need to deny our human-ness in order to have a numinous experience.¹² This understanding of mysticism meant that human connection to 'the Beyond within' or 'the Inner Light' could be felt at play, at school, at dinner, in the garden, on a steamship, in a group meeting for worship, or in a meeting for business.

⁵ Walters, K. S., 'Introduction: Mystic of the Everyday', in Walters, K.S. (ed), *Rufus Jones: Essential Writings*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001, p. 33.

⁶ Jones, R.M., 'Rufus M. Jones Papers', HC.MC. 1130, Quaker and Special Collections, Haverford College, Haverford, Pa.

⁷ 'American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)', accessed 5 December 2022, <https://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/217/American-Friends-Service-Committee-AFSC>.

⁸ In 1924, AFSC had established an Interracial Section to combine peace work with interracial work, although in 1928 the organisation cut the section due to a budget crisis, a decision that was apparently not difficult for the fiscally conservative Rufus Jones. See Austin, A. W., *Quaker Brotherhood: Interracial Activism and the American Friends Service Committee, 1917-1950*, Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2012, p. 46.

⁹ 'The Nobel Peace Prize 1947', [NobelPrize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1947/friends-committee/facts/), accessed 5 December 2022, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1947/friends-committee/facts/>.

¹⁰ Also known as *via negativa* or apophatic mysticism. See: Abbott, M. P., 'Mysticism Among Friends', *The Woodbrooke Journal* 3 (1998), and Randazzo, C., 'Affirmation Mysticism: The Activist Theology of Rufus Jones', *Quaker Religious Thought* 133 (2019), pp. 14-21.

¹¹ Rufus M. Jones cited in: Howard Brinton, H., 'Ethical Mysticism in the Society of Friends', Pendle Hill Pamphlet 156 (1967), Kindle edition, loc. 65.

¹² Randazzo, 'Affirmation Mysticism: The Activist Theology of Rufus Jones', p. 16.

While his language to describe ‘the Beyond within’ still hints at something ineffable, his language is very far from the mood of the apophatic mystics who use the imagery of emptiness, absence, darkness, and solitude.¹³ Instead, when Jones describes mystical experience, he focuses on the joyful, incarnate world. Moreover, mystical experience is found in human relationships. Jones wrote, ‘God is Spirit and therefore reveals Himself at the highest and best through man who, in his measure, is also Spirit’.¹⁴ He says this and also notes that ‘[t]he essential fact of religion is love, and love is impossible apart from relationships’.¹⁵ All of this is deeply aligned with the Quaker affinity for the Gospel of John and John’s repetition of the theme that God is Love. Love is experienced not as absence (negation) but as Presence (affirmation).

Second, given his high regard for the role of relationships in spiritual experience, we can call Jones’ approach to mysticism ‘communal’. It is worth noting that Jones makes little or no distinction between worship and mystical experience. In one of his autobiographical essays, Jones describes feeling the Spirit throb in silent meeting for worship as a child.¹⁶ He later wrote that the Church as described in Acts was a mystical fellowship.¹⁷ The entire purpose of a Quaker meeting for worship is to share an apprehension of the Inner Light with members of a community. The community collectively enriches the mystical experience of direct communion with the Presence.

Third, Jones’ understanding of mysticism is organic. The immanence of Spirit in creation means that life itself vibrates with holiness. As one of his posthumous editors writes, ‘[f]or Jones, the inscaped Spirit that flows through the material world is nothing less than the ongoing incarnational presence of God’.¹⁸ Like other Quaker experimentalists, Jones saw manifestations of Divine Presence in all aspects of the physical world and wanted to talk about the spiritual and the physical world in the same breath. He claimed that ‘Love is the principle of the spiritual universe as gravitation is of the physical’.¹⁹ This also means that Love imbues all of healthy Life.

A commitment to action in the world follows easily from Jones’ affirmative, communal, and organic conception of mysticism. It can be noted that the connection he makes here is part of a long Quaker tradition; Jones did not invent it. In the seventeenth

¹³ Jones, R. cited in: Cronk, S. L., *Dark Night Journey: Inward Re-Patterning Toward a Life Centered in God*, Wallingford, Pa: Pendle Hill Publications, 1991, p. 31.

¹⁴ Walters, K. S.,(ed), *Rufus Jones: Essential Writings*, Modern Spiritual Masters Series, Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2001, p. 74.

¹⁵ Walters, p. 65.

¹⁶ Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life*, p. 89.

¹⁷ Walters, *Rufus Jones*, p. 96.

¹⁸ Walters, p. 28.

¹⁹ Jones, R. M., *The Double Search: Studies in Atonement and Prayer*, Philadelphia, Pa.: John C. Winston, 1906, p. 110.

century, Friends referred to Gal. 5:22 and ‘the fruit of the Spirit [as] love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control’ to talk about the ways in which their inward experience and their outward behaviour in the world derived from the same Spirit.²⁰ The founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn, argued in 1682 that ‘[t]rue godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it’.²¹ Other interpreters have noted that two conceptions of Quakerism as being a peace church and as being ‘a group of mystics’ have existed side by side for a long time.²² The bottom line is that Jones believed that experiencing the Divine in mystical worship led people to engage with the world in ways that reflected the Sermon on the Mount. He preaches that ‘Christ calls men to a way of life that is *living to live*’.²³

Howard Thurman Meets Rufus Jones

Howard Thurman, Jones’ most influential student, was born in the segregated United States South in 1899. *The Luminous Darkness* begins with stories of ‘the frozen status’ he acquired as a child as a result of racist laws that were designed to prevent him from achieving his full potential by inculcating ‘self-rejection’.²⁴ Against the odds, he was able to graduate from high school, Morehouse College, and ultimately from Rochester Theological Seminary. Thurman first discovered Jones’ writing while attending a religious education conference near Oberlin, Ohio, in 1926. According to one of his biographers, when Thurman discovered *Finding the Trail of Life*, he sat down to read it on the spot, feeling like he had discovered in Jones what he was searching for, ‘a combination of insight and social feeling’.²⁵ What did Thurman see in Jones’ autobiographical narrative that was so compelling?

There are some surface similarities. Both men lost parents as children (Thurman’s father died when he was seven; Jones’ mother died when he was fifteen, prompting a dark night of the soul). Strong women played significant roles in the spiritual development of both men. Jones writes about his religious inclinations being nurtured by his elderly Aunt Peace and stories about his relationship with her may have resonated

²⁰ Barbour, H., *The Quakers in Puritan England*, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1964, pp. 119–22. Cited by Abbott, ‘Mysticism Among Friends’, p. 21.

²¹ Quakers in Britain, ‘23.02 | Quaker Faith & Practice’, accessed December 10, 2022, <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passage/23-02/>.

²² Abbott, ‘Mysticism Among Friends’, p. 1.

²³ Walters, *Rufus Jones*, p. 119.

²⁴ Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, p. 4.

²⁵ Massey, J.E., ‘Bibliographical Essay: Howard Thurman and Rufus M. Jones, Two Mystics’, *The Journal of Negro History* 57/2 (1972), p. 191.

with Thurman, who describes being deeply influenced by his grandmother, the formerly enslaved Nancy Ambrose, in the development of his religiosity.²⁶ Both men left home to go to high school facilitated by the kindness of strangers. Yet these coincidences are probably not what would have drawn Thurman to Jones.

When compared with Thurman's own reflections on his growing up, we can imagine deeper connections he might have seen in *Finding the Trail of Life*. For example, Chapter IV of *Finding the Trail of Life* contains an extended story in which Jones describes the thrill of becoming a member of his local village Library Association and discovering *Gulliver's Travels*. The book was confiscated by his Aunt Peace who decided that it was not true and that a good Quaker boy should not read fantastic stories.²⁷ This could have been a difficult story for Thurman to read. In *The Luminous Darkness* the public library plays a cameo role in his description of the pain and humiliation of being 'frozen in status' by Jim Crow laws that made it illegal for him to enter the library or borrow a book.²⁸ As a literary theologian, the pain of being denied access to books would have been especially real to Thurman. He might have felt a pang at the story of Aunt Peace confiscating a good read. Jones sprinkles *Finding the Trail of Life* with poetry, including excerpts from Browning, Wordsworth, Milton, and Tennyson, among others. Different poets feature in Thurman's work, but there is scarcely a sermon or an essay that Thurman wrote that does not include some verse.

Perhaps, even more important as a source of intellectual kinship was Jones' lengthy description of finding God in nature as a child. Jones' opus is full of embodied metaphors of growth and nurture for understanding spirituality. For example, 'Life culminates in forms of organism, in which the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. The kingdom of God is the highest form of such an organism that has yet emerged — a *corpus spirituale*, "a blessed community" — a living whole'.²⁹ In *Finding the Trail of Life*, he writes, 'my love of beauty in nature helped very much to strengthen and support my faith in God. I *felt* His presence in my world rather than thought out how He could be there'.³⁰ The reader of both Jones and Thurman can easily see a connection to Thurman's childhood memories of numinous encounters in a fishing boat on a lake where 'God just was [emphasis added]'.³¹ Jones' love of nature and science also frequently gives rise to metaphors. For example, in *Finding the Trail of Life* he writes, 'Nobody ever quite realises

²⁶ Harvey, P., 'The Story Howard Thurman Kept Telling About Race', *Sojourners*, September 28, 2020, <https://sojo.net/magazine/november-2020/story-howard-thurman-kept-telling-about-race>.

²⁷ Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life*, p. 69.

²⁸ Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, p. 4.

²⁹ Walters, *Rufus Jones*, p. 120.

³⁰ Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life*, p. 57.

³¹ Thurman, H., 'Prayer', in *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 2003, p. 96.

how his life is being woven day by day out of myriads of invisible threads The river may become a Mississippi and water half a continent, but its whole course will be determined by the top of the current at its source'.³² Perhaps this spoke to the man, Thurman, who went on to write about his favourite spiritual, *Deep River*, as an analogy for life.³³

Jones also writes about growing up 'in a world of love and fear' and seeing the tranquillity of his village disrupted by arson and a man full of hate and revenge.³⁴ He was convinced that love would triumph. Jones also describes seeing a barn that was blown down in the wind repaired by the people of the village who came together immediately to rebuild it:

It was a simple deed, which perhaps many towns could parallel, but it affected me in a strange way. I saw, as I had not seen before, that the religion of these men was not merely an affair of the meetinghouse; not merely a way to get into heaven. It was something that made them thoughtful of others and ready to sacrifice for others. I saw how it worked itself out in practical deeds of kindness and righteousness.³⁵

These two stories of hate and love merge in Jones' autobiography. Throughout his life, Jones argued that ultimately religion was not religion unless it culminated in building a beloved community, a concept introduced by one of his Harvard professors, Josiah Royce.³⁶ It is easy to see how the man who would later write *The Luminous Darkness* might be drawn to a theologian who wrote about hate and revenge at work in the world and his commitment to the idea that Love could overcome hate.

Whatever the exact leading was, Thurman was inspired to reach out to Jones. Thurman was eventually invited to study at Haverford as a special student of philosophy with Jones. The circumstances were extraordinary. Haverford did not, at the time, admit Black students, but somehow a special arrangement was made with lifelong consequences. In his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, Thurman wrote, 'My study at Haverford was a crucial experience, a watershed from which flowed much of the thought and endeavour to which I was to commit the rest of my working life. These months defined my deepest religious urges and framed in meaning much of what I had learned over the years'.³⁷

³² Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life*, p. 73.

³³ Thurman, H., *Deep River: An Interpretation of Negro Spirituals*, Mills College, Cal.: The Eucalyptus Press, 1945, p. 39.

³⁴ Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life*, p. 40.

³⁵ Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life*, p. 122.

³⁶ Jensen, K. and King, P., 'Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Howard Thurman, and Josiah Royce', *AMITY Volume 4:1* (2017), p. 16.

³⁷ Thurman, H., *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, San Diego, Cal.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979, pp. 76–77.

The Affirmation Mysticism of Howard Thurman

In the wake of this experience with the chief expounder of affirmation mysticism, Thurman maintained a lifelong affiliation with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). As Stephen W. Angell describes in *Black Fire: African American Quakers on Spirituality and Human Rights*, Thurman maintained a membership in the Wider Quaker Fellowship, spoke frequently at Quaker gatherings, and Quaker periodicals regularly published his essays.³⁸ Since his death, Friends United Press has kept a number of his books and pamphlets in print.

One of the innovations of seventeenth century Quaker mysticism was the language of ‘centering down’ along with other newly minted phrases like the Inner Christ ‘speaking to my condition’ and being ‘brought down to the root’ by Spirit.³⁹ Thurman adopted the language of ‘centering down’ and popularised it as a way of talking about engaging with Spirit. Writing about the discipline of prayer, Thurman describes the sacramental moment in which God appears as the culmination of waiting and centering down.⁴⁰ He writes, ‘I agree most heartily with Rufus Jones when he says that prayer at its best is when the soul enjoys God and prays out of sheer love of Him’.⁴¹ Thurman’s mysticism throbs and vibrates with life. He talks to his plants,⁴² he sees God in a fishing boat, he wants to dance and sing.

In considering the spiritual discipline of prayer, Thurman regularly talks about the use of quiet and solitude in order to minimise distractions, to ‘centre down’ as a mystic in order to have communion with God in prayer. He describes his own affirmation mysticism in this way:

[Prayer] is the movement of the heart of a man toward God; a movement that in a sense is within God — God in the heart sharing its life with God the Creator of all Life. The hunger is God, calling to God. It is fundamental to my thought that God is the Creator of Life, the Creator of the living substance, the Creator of existence, and as such expresses himself through life.... This is the meaning, essentially, of the notion that life is alive and this is a living universe. Man himself cannot be an exception to this fact.⁴³

³⁸ Angell, S. W., (ed), ‘Howard Thurman’, in *Black Fire: African American Quakers on Spirituality and Human Rights*, Philadelphia, Pa.: Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, 2011.

³⁹ Steere, D. V., (ed), *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*, New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1984, p. 18.

⁴⁰ Angell, ‘Howard Thurman’, p. 72.

⁴¹ Thurman, ‘Prayer’, p. 102.

⁴² Thurman, H., ‘Reconciliation’, in *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 2003, p. 105.

⁴³ Thurman, ‘Prayer’, p. 87.

The conversation with God therefore leads directly to ‘living to live’. Thurman’s preaching and his teaching are replete with examples and anecdotes of people having sacred encounters that underscore the embodiedness of persons. Soul speaks to soul. This embodied conversation is central to his discussion of both mysticism and reconciliation. Thurman underscores the human need to be loved and to know that we are held in regard. We need to know that we are ends in ourselves. His is a mysticism that centres a throbbing, thrumming love of life that celebrates relationship with the Divine through poetry, literature, dance, and song. Given his concern with individuals who live with ‘their backs up against the wall’ and who are forced to regularly contend with desolation, it is almost impossible to imagine Thurman accepting a negation mysticism which would grow out of self-abnegation.⁴⁴

Thurman, Jones, and the Sin of Segregation

The interconnectedness of Thurman’s spirituality and his social witness is most apparent in his discussion of segregation as a sickness of the spirit. Thurman’s anger at systematic racial injustice and the failure of the church to act to overcome it is both palpable and restrained in his writing. *Jesus and the Disinherited* offers an appraisal of the ways in which living with injustice spiritually distorts Black people who live ‘with their backs up against the wall’.⁴⁵ *The Luminous Darkness* is uncompromising in its analysis of how white people uphold racist behaviour and policies and the damage that these do to the bodies of Black folk and the withered spirits and corrupted souls of haters.⁴⁶ Thurman is unambiguous in identifying racist bigotry as structural violence that prevents human beings from achieving their full potential. Yet even as he grieves the sin of segregation, Thurman imagines that the Spirit can and does call people to be different. In *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples*, he writes, ‘[t]he movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of men and women often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, they are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires’.⁴⁷

As theologians, Jones and Thurman both thought explicitly about the role of imagination in spiritual life, which was unusual for their day.⁴⁸ Their claims about the role of imagination in spiritual life are different, however. For Jones, imagination is

⁴⁴ Thurman, H., *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2022, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

⁴⁶ Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, p. 45.

⁴⁷ Thurman, H., *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples*, New York, N.Y.: Harper, 1959, p. 7.

⁴⁸ Keefe-Perry, L. C., *Sense of the Possible: An Introduction to Theology and Imagination*, Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2023.

a singular event for an individual. In *New Eyes for Invisibles*, he writes, ‘Getting your imagination captured is almost the whole of life.... The way to become the architect of your fate, the captain of your soul, is to have your imagination captured’.⁴⁹ Thurman writes about imagination as an everyday miracle that is foundational to loving human relationships. Thurman writes, ‘The place where the imagination shows its greatest power as the agent of God is in the miracle it creates when one man, standing where he is, is able, while remaining there, to put himself in another man’s place’.⁵⁰ Where Jones is a captain, Thurman is an agent. One wonders at the difference between thinking about imagination as a person who embodies privilege and as a person who strives to overcome embodied injustice.

One further wonders if there might be a sense in which Thurman might be writing about his mentor in *The Luminous Darkness* when he discusses his grief and his sorrow about the sin of segregation. In *With Head and Heart*, Thurman reflects,

During the entire time with Rufus, the issue of racial conflict never arose, for the fact of racial differences was never dealt with at the conscious level. The ethical emphasis of his interpretations of mystical religion dealt primarily with war and the poverty and hunger of whole populations, and the issues arising from the conflict between nations. Paradoxically, in his presence, the specific issues of race with which I had been confronted all my life as a black man in America seemed strangely irrelevant. I felt that somehow he transcended race; I did so, too, temporarily, and in retrospect, this aspect of my time with him remains an enigma.⁵¹

Jones’ convictions and work in the world addressed the macro world of international relations more than interpersonal affairs even though he wrote about interpersonal kindness in *Finding the Trail of Life*. As a person of privilege, even with the significant interpersonal connection with Thurman, he was able to opt in or out of a social witness focused on ending the daily humiliations of race faced by Black people in the United States. Worse, at one point Jones discusses the inhumanity of ‘the white slave trade’ without nodding to the horrors of chattel slavery experienced by Blacks in the United States.⁵² Rufus Jones was professionally active for nearly twenty years after his semester with Thurman. During this time, he did not acknowledge a friendship with Thurman in his theological works, including books like *A Call to What is Vital*. He did publicly talk

⁴⁹ Walters, *Rufus Jones*, p. 84.

⁵⁰ Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, p. 99.

⁵¹ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, p. 77.

⁵² Walters, *Rufus Jones*, p. 140.

about his friendship with and admiration for Jan Smuts, the South African author of apartheid.⁵³

Epistemic Advantage, Ignorance, and Responsibility

It is easy to see how Howard Thurman was attracted to the writings of Rufus Jones. The two mystics and activists had much to discuss regarding Spirit and the physical world. They both believed that mystical experiences, direct experiences of divine Presence in nature, in worship, or in relationships would naturally lead to work in the world to try to create a beloved community or the kingdom of God on Earth. A significant difference, hinted at but not explicitly named by Thurman, is that Jones was able to ignore racial conflict in his imagination of the beloved community. In other words, given his position of privilege and the epistemic advantages he was able to maintain as a white patriarch, Jones was able to maintain a stance of active, hermeneutical ignorance regarding racial injustice. Yet, as Thurman explained in his writing and in his life's work, the bigotry and the hate that make segregation possible is a violent sin. He discusses the failure of President Eisenhower to lend his moral authority to the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).⁵⁴ Thurman is even more aggrieved by the absence of a Christian ethic of love within white churches that embrace 'sprawling notions of superiority' and support 'racial and religious bigotry'.⁵⁵

The concepts of active and wilful hermeneutical ignorance and of epistemic advantage, as theorised by José Medina, Christine Wieseler, and Lidal Dror, might be useful in understanding what inhibited the imagination of liberal white theologians like Jones and may account, in part, for the missing conversation about race.⁵⁶ Wilful hermeneutical ignorance is shorthand for the stance taken by persons in a position of privilege when they choose not to credit or accept knowledge claims made by marginalised persons who are working to overcome oppression. The claim that 'all lives matter' in response to 'Black lives matter' could be an example of wilful hermeneutical ignorance. It is an assertive knowledge-producing as well as knowledge-avoiding posture. Active ignorance is a less assertive, but not necessarily less damaging, posture. José Medina describes active ignorance as 'the convergence of the epistemic vices of...arrogance, laziness, and close-mindedness' that act as a defence mechanism against awareness of

⁵³ Jones, R. M., *A Call to What Is Vital*, New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1949, p. 87.

⁵⁴ Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, p. 63.

⁵⁶ See Dror, L., 'Is There an Epistemic Advantage to Being Oppressed?', *Noûs* 57/3 (2023), pp. 618–40. Also see Medina, J., *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*, New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2013. And also see: Wieseler, C., 'Epistemic Oppression and Ableism in Bioethics', *Hypatia* 35/4 (2020), pp. 714–32.

racial and gender injustice. The appropriate metaphor here is Nero fiddling while Rome burns (even more appropriate if Nero was fiddling to the light of burning martyrs). One of the features of both active and wilful hermeneutical ignorance as exercised by persons of privilege is the practice of *insensitivity to insensitivity*.⁵⁷ This insensitivity, we might speculate, is what makes it possible for a liberal white theologian to speak about the horrors of white slavery without acknowledging the real and terrible history of the enslavement of black people.

The challenge for privileged persons is to learn how to overcome active ignorance and insensitivity. A starting point must be that it is possible for persons of privilege to work at and succeed, to some degree, in understanding the life experiences of people who have been marginalised.⁵⁸ The working assumption of this project is that the epistemic advantages that may accrue to the disenfranchised are also available, if they work at it, to the fully franchised who want to understand injustice. Were this not the case, people of privilege could not be held morally responsible for their failure to comprehend injustice.⁵⁹

Persons of privilege, for example white people who occupy space like the space Rufus Jones occupied, have intrapsychic work to do in recognizing the privilege that ignores injustice, acknowledging it, and working to disrupt it. The goal is to transform moral imagination. Quakers can pause and reflect on Medina's question, "When I look at you, I do not see color or gender". What kind of claim is this? And could it ever be made proudly?"⁶⁰ As people who have made that claim proudly and can imagine that Rufus Jones would also have made it proudly, those are questions worth exploring.

Dramaturgy as Theology

The one act play that follows builds on the work of Sunder John Boopalan, Rebecca Chopp, Resmaa Menakem, Grace Cho, and Willie Jennings in order to envision how the epistemic vices of active ignorance and wilful hermeneutical ignorance are perpetuated and might be transformed. Boopalan conceptualises 'rituals of humiliation' that have upheld white supremacy, using four criteria to define them:

- (1) the subject feels humiliated by the act;
- (2) the action must have a repetitive, identifiable pattern;
- (3) The act may have inherited its discriminatory logic from

⁵⁷ Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 18.

⁵⁸ Dror, 'Is There an Epistemic Advantage to Being Oppressed?'

⁵⁹ See Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 39. Also see Wieseler, 'Epistemic Oppression and Ableism in Bioethics', p. 716.

⁶⁰ Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 37.

culturally, religiously, or legally sanctioned codes from the past; and because of the above and (4) the humiliation does not depend on the so-called ‘intention’ of the actor or aggressor.⁶¹

Boopalan argues that mourning and grieving the collective trauma inflicted by rituals of humiliation is a necessary component of healing that must also be accompanied by transgressors accepting responsibility for wrongdoing, especially the sin of disremembering racist trauma. The play embraces the importance of poetics for reimagining the world.⁶² It builds on Resmaa Menakem’s work on the unavoidable and indispensable work of acknowledging the body in transcending trauma, nodding to the ways in which Thurman himself frequently wrote and spoke about embodied trauma.⁶³ Although Jones and Thurman did not have a conversation about race during their lifetimes, the play imagines the possibility of a conversation in *kairos* time by invoking their ghosts, following Grace Cho’s significant theological lead in thinking about the role of haunting and ghosts in considering the action of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ Willie Jennings himself has a cameo role in speaking to the figure of the self-sufficient white man at a seminary.⁶⁵ In the dramatic imagination that follows, Jones is still cured of his epistemic vices in miraculously short order. Testimony does the work of healing in the telling and there are more voices ready to testify.

⁶¹ Boopalan, S. J., *Memory, Grief, and Agency: A Political Theological Account of Wrongs and Rites*, New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2017, p. 52.

⁶² Chopp, R., ‘Theology and the Poetics of Testimony’, *Criterion*, Winter (1998), pp. 2–12.

⁶³ Menakem, R., *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, Las Vegas, Nev.: Central Recovery Press, 2017.

⁶⁴ Cho, G. M., *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

⁶⁵ Jennings, W. J., *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020.

HOWARD AND RUFUS

A One-Act Play

CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

MOB

WITNESS

BLACK MAN

WHITE MAN

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

HOWARD, teacher and mystic (age unspecified)

STUDENTS

GHOST OF RUFUS

GHOST OF HOWARD

YOUNG WHITE BOY

OLDER WHITE WOMAN

YOUNG BLACK BOY

TIME

Kairos time. Now, but not yet. A time when God is speaking and we have ears to listen.

PLACE

A street, a classroom, the first-floor lobby at Boston University, outside a public library.

PROPS

Rainbow-Coloured Jetpack of Epistemic Advantage.

Scene I-1: Prologue

(Action takes place on the proscenium, in front of a closed curtain.)

MOB

(Dressed in black, waving black flags, moving menacingly from left to right.)

DIS-remember! DIS-remember! DIS-remember! DIS-remember!

WITNESS

(One figure, dressed in multiple colours, walks defiantly, shielding head with arms, through MOB moving right to left.)

I am remembering! ... I can remember! ... I must remember!

Scene I-2: Rituals of Humiliation

(Set consists of three freestanding doors in frames arranged so that the audience can see actors on both sides of each door.)

BLACK MAN

(Knocking on Door 1)

May I enter?

WHITE MAN

(Opens Door 1 a crack)

Of course not!

(Slams door)

MOB

(Chanted nearly simultaneously, i.e., not 4 times in a row)

DIS-remember! DIS-remember! DIS-remember! DIS-remember!

BLACK MAN

(Knocking on Door 2)

May I enter?

WHITE MAN

(Opens Door 2)

Of course!

BLACK MAN

(Moves to enter Door 2)

WHITE MAN

(Slams Door 2)

NOT!

MOB

(overlapping Voices)

DIS-remember! DIS-remember! DIS-remember! DIS-remember!

BLACK MAN

(Knocking on Door 3)

May I enter?

WHITE MAN

(Opens Door 3, brandishing gun)

Get the hell out of here!

(BLACK MAN runs off Stage right)

WHITE MAN

(Slams Door 3)

Good riddance!

MOB

(Overlapping voices)

DIS-remember! DIS-remember! DIS-remember! DIS-remember!

BLACK MAN

(Knocking on Door 1)

May I enter?

WHITE MAN

(Opens Door 1, with flourish)

Enter!

(BLACK MAN hesitates, moves cautiously to enter)

MOB

(Overlapping voices)

Hurry up, Boy!

You're so lazy!

How can you be so slow? You must be stupid!

(Singsong to tune 'Jesus loves me')

Eenie meenie minie mo. You're a coward, this we know!

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

We see that you are afraid. You are careful. It is wise. ... Be cautious. We stand with you.

WHITE MAN

(Pointing to BLACK MAN)

Black man.

BLACK MAN
(Pointing to WHITE MAN)

White man.

WHITE MAN
(Pointing to BLACK MAN)

Black man.

BLACK MAN
(Pointing to WHITE MAN)

White man.

WHITE MAN and BLACK MAN

(In unison, both pointing to WHITE MAN and BLACK MAN, in other words, to self or other at the same time)

Black man. White man. Black man. White man. Black man. White man.

WHITE MAN
(Speaking to audience)

I do not see colour.

BLACK MAN
(Speaking to audience)

I do not believe him. And, if he does not see my colour, how can he see my pain?

MOB

Pain! Pain? You feel no pain! I'll give you something to cry about!

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

We feel your pain. We see you. We feel you. You are not forgotten. We will walk with you.

CURTAIN

Scene I-3: Testimony and the Body

(Set consists of freestanding chalkboard, teacher's desk, and students seated at desks)

HOWARD
(Writing on chalkboard)

Now we will learn 'to grieve'.

STUDENTS
(In unison)

I grieve
You grieve
He/she/it grieves
We grieve
You grieve
They grieve

STUDENT 1

Why do we grieve?

HOWARD
(Cradling hand)

We grieve so that we might feel.

STUDENTS
(In unison)

I feel
You feel
He/she/it feels
We feel
You feel
They feel

HOWARD

‘One day when I was raking leaves to earn some money, a little white girl kept scattering leaves and making a mess of things. I finally told her to stop. Then she became angry and took a pin and stabbed me in the hand.

(Mimics stabbing hand and flinches)

How could she do that? How her soul was distorted! When I asked her why in the world she did that, she said, ‘Oh, Howard, that didn’t hurt you! You can’t feel!’⁶⁶

I felt. I feel. I am feeling.

⁶⁶ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 12.

STUDENTS

You feel; I grieve.

HOWARD

I grieve; you feel

STUDENTS

We feel; you grieve

HOWARD

I feel; I grieve

STUDENTS

(Gathering around and comforting HOWARD)

I feel you grieve

You feel me grieve

We feel you grieve

We feel him grieve

CURTAIN

Scene II-1: Haunting

(Main lobby of the Boston University School of Theology. The Methodist symbol of Cross and Flame dominates.)

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

‘No one can be happy in Heaven if they left their brother in Hell’.⁶⁷

(GHOSTs of HOWARD and RUFUS emerge through the walls)

GHOST OF RUFUS

Why are we here?

GHOST OF HOWARD

(Pointing to the Cross and Flame)

You need to see this.

⁶⁷ See Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2007), 138. Pronouns altered.

GHOST OF RUFUS

Why are you asking me to comment on a Methodist symbol?

GHOST of HOWARD

You see a Methodist symbol?

GHOST OF RUFUS

Yes, of course, this is a Methodist seminary. I don't belong here.

GHOST OF HOWARD

But, Rufus, you fit right in! In your day, you could walk through these halls and no one would question your right to be here, a self-sufficient white male theologian. Your privilege here would have been golden.

(Scoffs) I did not belong here. 'It is a strange freedom to be adrift in the world of men without a sense of anchor anywhere.... It is a strange freedom to go nameless up and down the streets of other minds where no salutation greets and no sign is given to mark the place one calls one's own'.⁶⁸

(Shakes self and looks at Rufus) You see a Methodist symbol, a crucifix. Why don't you Quakers depict the cross in your meetinghouses?

GHOST OF RUFUS

Howard, you know this well!

GHOST OF HOWARD

Tell me again.

GHOST OF RUFUS

Waiting on the Spirit is not enhanced by outward symbols. We prefer to worship in unadorned spaces where we are less likely to be distracted from the simple practice of contemplation.

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

(Singing)

'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free

'Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be

And when we find ourselves in the place just right...

⁶⁸ Thurman, *The Inward Journey*, 37.

GHOST OF HOWARD

(Interrupting)

But what do you *see* when you see this Cross and Flame?

GHOST OF RUFUS

I can tell that you are getting at something here, but I don't know what.

GHOST OF HOWARD

What do you *feel* when you see this Cross and Flame?

GHOST OF RUFUS

Feel? I don't know. I don't feel anything. It doesn't move me.

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

(Singing)

'But everybody talking 'bout Heaven

Ain't going there.

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Curious, now)

Do you feel something when you see this symbol?

GHOST OF HOWARD

(Shuddering, massaging hand and rubbing neck)

Yes, I feel something! Do you remember, back in 1929, when I tried to talk with you about lynching?

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Horried)

Lynching! What? No, that would not have been seemly! It would not have been polite!

GHOST OF HOWARD

That's right. You said, 'These peas are delicious'.

Rufus, I owe you a debt of gratitude for our time together and everything I learned from you about centering down in prayer and life affirming mysticism, but, my Capital 'F' Friend, I am dismayed that you remain so clueless!

Every time I look at the Cross and Flame I see the KKK burning a cross on my neighbour's front yard. I see white supremacy and another Black body strung up to die at the hands of white bigotry and hate. I shiver; I sweat. My mind reels. My body remembers.

(Massaging hand and rubbing neck)

I can't believe that you and I did not talk about this. Yes, I can believe it. No, I can't believe it.

Politeness? 'These peas are delicious'?!

You devoted your life to charity and compassion. I want to see responsibility and moral agency! Black lives are at stake. Somehow, you were able to overlook the suffering of my community! What kind of Christianity is this? What kind of Quaker are you?

(Silence for a few beats, then, angrily pointing at Cross and Flame)

And I can't believe this symbol is still here. Is this a sign that my presence here mattered so little?

(Laments)

Oh! Oh! Oh!

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Warmly)

You know, Howard, when I look at you I do not see a Black man.

GHOST OF HOWARD

(Startled)

What? What did you say?

GHOST OF RUFUS

I mean, you always seemed like a normal person to me.

GHOST OF HOWARD

(Incredulous)

Normal? Normal as in *White*?

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Perplexed)

Well... Yes.

GHOST OF HOWARD

Rufus, I AM my body. If you do not see a Black man, you do not see me or all the circumstances that described my life.

(GHOST OF HOWARD explodes into a kaleidoscope of characters in different shapes, sizes, colours, wailing like the GHOST OF MARLEY in *A Christmas Carol*)

Oh! Oh! Oh!

GHOST OF RUFUS

What is happening? Howard! Help! I don't understand.

GHOST OF HOWARD

(Rematerialises as a single character)

That's a start. If you acknowledge that you don't understand, you might be able to overcome this startling and wilful hermeneutical ignorance. Do you still think white is *normal*?

(Begins to dematerialise again into a kaleidoscope of characters)

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Holding, shaking head, on the verge of tears)

I don't understand what is happening. I do not understand what I don't understand!

GHOST OF HOWARD

(Rematerialises, reaches hand into wall, retrieves two Rainbow-Coloured Jetpacks of Epistemic Advantage and hands one to GHOST OF RUFUS)

Good. That's better. Here, try this on.

GHOST OF RUFUS

This is a curious object. What is it?

GHOST OF HOWARD

Curious, indeed! This is a Rainbow-Coloured Jetpack of Epistemic Advantage!

GHOST OF RUFUS

A Rainbow what of what?

GHOST OF HOWARD

A Rainbow-Coloured Jetpack of Epistemic Advantage! You, my Friend, lived a life of privilege and just made an outrageous statement that to be white is to be normal, suggesting that, given an option, I would prefer now to be white. I would prefer to be taken seriously as a credible witness to my own lived experience.

GHOST OF RUFUS

But, of course, you are a credible witness!

GHOST OF HOWARD

My friend, I think you do protest too much. I wonder if you have ever really seen me. We shall soon find out if your active ignorance can be cured. 'Our imaginings can be conformist or resistant when they look back into our past, when they look forward into our future, when they look around our present, and when they look sideways into alternative realities'.⁶⁹ Let us see what we can see.

CURTAIN

Scene II-2: Library

(Set consists of a door with a sign clearly identifying it as PUBLIC LIBRARY. GHOST OF HOWARD AND GHOST OF RUFUS appear stage left wearing Rainbow-Coloured Jetpacks of Epistemic Advantage. A YOUNG WHITE BOY comes hopping out of the library door carrying a large, beautifully illustrated *Gulliver's Travels*.)

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Beaming)

Oh, I was so happy when I got my library card! I loved discovering *Gulliver's Travels*.

GHOST OF HOWARD

I can imagine.

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Notices a stern, OLDER WHITE WOMAN crossing briskly across the stage to YOUNG WHITE BOY.)

⁶⁹ Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 299.

There is Aunt Peace! She was concerned that the book was not true and confiscated it!
(OLDER WHITE WOMAN seizes book from YOUNG WHITE BOY and scolds him wordlessly.)

I was so mad when she took that book from me. It was as if she stole my imagination!

GHOST OF HOWARD

I can imagine.

GHOST OF RUFUS

What was your favourite library book as a child?

GHOST OF HOWARD

Pay attention now.

(A YOUNG BLACK BOY approaches the PUBLIC LIBRARY and knocks on the door. The MOB approaches from stage right.)

MOB

(Overlapping voices)

Get away from the library!

You don't belong here.

Don't let me see you darken this door.

This space is for white people only.

If you enter, you'll have hell to pay!

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Staring, as set is reduplicated on many screens showing YOUNG BLACK BOY being denied entrance to PUBLIC LIBRARY and being violently attacked)

No! What is happening here?

GHOST OF HOWARD

You thought you were unlucky to have ONE book confiscated from you, but now, perhaps, wearing the Rainbow-Coloured Jetpack of Epistemic Advantage you are perceiving that there are people, many people of colour, who have their entire futures confiscated because they are never allowed to exercise their imagination in the world of books. Listen to these people testify!

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

(Overlapping voices)

I was beaten for trying to go to school.

We were kicked out of the library.

He was lynched because he did well in school.

We were attacked for trying to vote.

It isn't safe to be a curious person of colour.

(Armed MOB chases BLACK MAN and BLACK WOMAN across stage.)

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Grasping his Rainbow-Coloured Jetpack of Epistemic Advantage)

No. How could I not have seen this? How could I not have known? It is easier for me to imagine a world with two suns than to acknowledge this horror.

GHOST OF HOWARD

Yes, I imagine that is true. How much of your imagination has been put to the use of denial and covering up what you cannot bear to know? My Friend, you are morally culpable for what you choose not to see! You must no longer be actively ignorant. We do not need to be the same to care for each other, but you must be able to acknowledge my pain.

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

(Reprise)

I was beaten for trying to go to school.

We were kicked out of the library.

He was lynched because he did well in school.

We were attacked for trying to vote.

It isn't safe to be a curious person of colour.

GHOST OF RUFUS

(Joining lament)

Oh! Oh! Oh! I hurt you; I hurt you and many others in the spirit and in the flesh. I am sorry! I am morally responsible for not seeing you and hurting you. I will grieve with you. Ignorance is woe. May this memory haunt me and my kin as it has hurt you and yours. May this haunting memory change every community that remembers us.

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

We all grieve! We remember Emmett, we remember Trayvon, we remember Malcolm and Tyree, George, Breonna and Michael and all the other innocents murdered because they were Black. We will grieve with each other.

MOB

(Offstage chanting sotto voce)

DIS-remember, DIS-remember, DIS-remember

CLOUD OF WITNESSES, GHOST OF HOWARD, AND GHOST OF RUFUS

(Consoling each other, singing and shouting, eventually drowning out the voices of the MOB)

We CAN remember! We HAVE remembered! We DO remember! WE WILL remember.

Author note

In 1929, the same year that the influential black American theologian and preacher Howard Thurman was studying with Rufus Jones at Haverford, my grandfather published the first edition of his book, *Blindspots: Experiments in the Self-cure of Race Prejudice*.⁷⁰ The 1948 edition contains an argument about the Christian impossibility of racially divided churches that is reminiscent of Thurman's central claims in *The Luminous Darkness*.⁷¹ Younger than Jones and older than Thurman, my grandfather travelled in similar circles. As Executive Secretary of the American branch of the Universal Christian Council he was active in fighting against Christian nationalism and promoting international peace and understanding between the wars. As Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, he was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities for his collaboration with the NAACP. Yet growing up, I was taught to treat Black people "as if" they were equal. Too recently I have begun to comprehend the power, insult, and damage done by "as if." While these two words contain potential for transformation, e.g., 1 Cor. 7:30, they are also conditional and may be raised or lowered like a drawbridge, granting or denying access as the occasion warrants. The research that I did for this article is part of my recovering insider's work toward understanding of the ways in which liberal white Protestant supremacy has functioned theologically.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

⁷⁰ Leiper, H S., *Blind Spots: Experiments in the Self-Cure of Race Prejudice*, New York, N.Y.: Friendship Press, 1929.

⁷¹ See: 'Getting the Golden Rule Angle' in Leiper, *Blind Spots: Experiments in the Self-Cure of Race Prejudice*, New York, N.Y.: Friendship Press, 6th edn., 1948. and Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, pp. 111–13.

