

## **The Disinherited in an Inherited Context: Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* Reconsidered**

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### **Abstract**

In *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Howard Thurman presented a socio-spiritual of Jesus within the context of oppression, injustice, and inequality. A careful survey of works within the Jesus studies shows that Thurman's work is not fully appreciated and publicized in Jesus studies today despite its that it has greatly influenced American people and brought radical changes within the human rights activists, particularly Martin Luther King Jr and many others, in the American society. Given that Thurman's work has influenced the American society, this work analyses *Jesus and the Disinherited* from a different perspective, that is, the inherited being dominated and oppressed by people who do not possess inheritance as witnessed in the Nigerian context within various religious circles. This paper sees Thurman's work as a viable tool for solving the segregation and injustice which exist between poor and the rich in any arm of the human society. It would also aim at becoming a voice against the religio-political and socio-economic struggles between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria.

**Key words:** Howard Thurman, Disinherited, Poor, Christianity, Muslims, Inherited

### **Introduction**

Historically, discrimination, inequality and segregation have dominated American society. These societal problems concerned Thurman and spurred his reinterpretation of Jesus' message in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. By the disinherited, Thurman means the poor, the dispossessed and those who walk with their backs against the wall. The central and repeated question in the book is: what does the religion of Jesus say to the disinherited? Considering this concern, Corey D. B. Walker sees Thurman drawing our attention to the "radical impermanence," that is, the condition of those who exist on the margins and on the underside of the modern world.<sup>1</sup> Such a societal struggle created a segregated community with understandable hostility between the influential and disinherited in the society and even within the confines of

Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Thurman's work becomes even more interesting as it applies to the Nigerian context. With this in mind, this essay aims at rereading Thurman from a Nigerian perspective.

In Nigeria today, there is a massive struggle between the elites and the poor. There is an additional complexity related to the influence of minority Muslims who are attempting to override the 'inherited' in the native villages.<sup>3</sup> The word "inherited" is used here to mean the indigenous people of the land who are being dispossessed by foreigners within the middle belt of Nigeria. This work analyses the role of the disinherited people, in their attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> Corey D. B. Walker, "That Shape Am I": Pragmatism, Religion, and the Politics of Life," *Religion and Culture Web Forum, The Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School* <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/webforum/102009/That%20Shape%20Am%20I.pdf> [Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> January, 2019] pp. 3-4.

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<sup>2</sup> For more study of the blacks, particularly black Christianity, see Reggie L. Williams, "The Problem of the Human in Theological Anthropology: Reading Jürgen Moltmann's Christology with Intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance," *Theology Today* 74 (2017), pp. 36-40.

<sup>3</sup> M. B. Ajibefun, "Social and Economic Effects of the Menace of Fulani Herdsmen Crises in Nigeria" *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 8 (2018), pp. 133-9. Beetseh Kwaghga, Dzever Samuel Tion and Victoria M. Terwase, "Herdsmen/Farmers Crises in Nigeria: The Role of Librarians in Resolving Crises" <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5030&context=libphilprac> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2019].

override and displace the inherited people from their indigenous lands. This struggle has become socio-religious in Nigeria, whereby disinherited Hausa-Fulani groups from far North are beginning to exercise dominion over the inherited in the middle belt, Nigeria. This work sees the work of Thurman as being a 'sword' for enlightenment, which hopes to curb these societal conflicts in Nigeria.

This work is divided into four sections; 1) it discusses Thurman in the midst of the Jesus scholarship 2) it throws light on Thurman's bigger picture of Jesus 3) it considers the influence of Thurman's work on society 4) and lastly, it applies the thoughts of Thurman to the Nigerian context, considering the state at which the inherited people are becoming disinherited within the Nigerian socio-economic and geo-political system.

### Placing Thurman in Jesus Scholarship

The aim of this section is to situate the work of Thurman in the midst of the critical questions about Jesus, which took on new momentum in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In a study of Jesus' scholarship, John D. Crossan identifies three historical stages of the study of Jesus; the first is the traditional Jesus which was established by the apostles and continued to the reformation age. The second is the historical Jesus that came as a product of the Age of the Enlightenment which sought scientific approaches to the study of Jesus and the Gospels. The third is the fictional Jesus which started with the Jesus Seminar and continues to the present.<sup>4</sup>

The focus of this work is the second division (the historical Jesus). This period of historical studies resulted in a critical and secular re-evaluation of the traditional view of the Gospels. The period used an anti-supernatural basis to study the life of Jesus in the Gospels. Faith became a "minor voice" and reading the Gospels via reason began to dominate scholarly approaches. This period adopted historical-critical

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<sup>4</sup> John Dominic Crossan, "In Their Own Words," *Biblical Archaeological Review* 33 (2007), p. 22.

readings which viewed Jesus in history to be the same as any historical figure, and viewed the Gospels as any other literary composition. These aims and presuppositions have attracted the attention of a wide spectrum of readers (Christians, non-Christians, scholars, pastors and laypeople) over the last four centuries. Craig L. Blomberg observes that Jesus has been studied in literature beyond any man for more than the past two hundred years.<sup>5</sup> A similar view is shared by Albert Nolan that the words of Jesus have been turned to mean everything, anything and nothing.<sup>6</sup>

The historical approach to the study of Jesus perhaps emerged through three stages of enquiry; the first, second and the third quests for the historical Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have not been comfortable with this classification within the historical Jesus and have questioned the authenticity of this classification. For example, F. B. Rubio and Anthony Le Donne challenge the three-quest paradigm and find it misleading; hence, critical evaluations of the Jesus tradition predates Reimarus.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Craig S. Blomberg, *Making Sense of the New Testament* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Also see F. B. Rubio, "The Fiction of the 'Three Quests': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Historiographical Paradigm," *JSHJ* 7 (2009), pp. 211–253. Alan F. Segal, "How I Stopped worrying about Mel Gibson and Learned to Love the Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Review of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*," *JSHJ* 2 (2004), pp. 190–208. J. P. Meier, "The Historical Jesus and the Historical Law: Some Problems within the Problem," *CBQ* 1 (2003). Darrell L. Bock, "Faith and the Historical Jesus: Does a Confessional Position and Respect for the Jesus Tradition Preclude Serious Historical Engagement?" *JSHJ* 9 (2011), pp. 3–25. J. D. Thomas, "Mapping the Word, Reading the World: Biocartography and the 'Historical' Jesus," *Religion and the Arts* 18 (2014), pp. 447–97.

<sup>8</sup> For more studies see Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing Company, 1995). Samuel O. Abogunrin, "In Search of the Original Jesus" An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan on Thursday, July 16<sup>th</sup> 1998 (Published, Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 2003). Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical*

Within the quest for the historical Jesus, the so-called first quest centered on an anti-supernatural reading of the Gospels. In this view, they are myths of the early church. This can be seen in the works of Reimarus, Strauss, Wrede, Renan and Bultmann (Strimple; Abogunrin; Schweitzer; Kee; Brown). The period classified as the "no quest" has been part of the first quest of the historical Jesus.<sup>9</sup> The so-called second quest started around 1953 and emphasized the renewal of interest in the historical relationship between Jesus' life and messages and the view of the early church about him as revealed in the works of Kasemann, Fuchs, Bornkamm and Robinson.<sup>10</sup> The third quest emphasizes the Jewishness of Jesus in his socio-cultural and political contexts in Palestine with scholars like Crossan, Witherington III, Wright, Keener and Borg among many others.<sup>11</sup>

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*Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961). Howard Clarke Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970). Collins Brown, "Quest of Historical Jesus," In Joel B. Green, Scott McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Though many scholars of Jesus tend to call the end of the First Quest, the No Quest, thinking Jesus discussions got into silence after the work of Schweitzer, it has been argued the designation 'No Quest' is probably an overstatement because what is called 'No Quest' was the end of the First Quest. For more analysis, see C S Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), p. 84. Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 18-24, 141-52. Stanley E. Porter, "Reading the Gospels Today and the Historical Jesus," In Stanley E. Porter, ed., *Reading the Gospels Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 31-4.

<sup>10</sup> Also see James M. Robinson, *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). Günter Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Collins, 1960). Ernst Fuchs, *Studies in the Historical Jesus* (Illinois: Allession, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> See Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers

Howard Thurman was an African American theologian, a philosopher, and an educator, who also served as a civil rights leader. Thurman taught at Howard University in Washington, DC. An encounter with Mahatma Gandhi in India shaped Thurman's life and theology.<sup>12</sup> When Thurman wrote *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), the emphasis of Jesus' studies was on the message of Jesus but ignored the place of the poor. Thurman's interest, both personal and professional, became the place of the poor or the disinherited in society and the inability for Christianity to deal with the questions of the displaced. Thurman asked, "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?"<sup>13</sup>

Within this understanding, *Jesus and the Disinherited* presents a new interpretation of the message of Jesus, which concentrates on the various teaching of Jesus. The focus on Jesus' words was a dominant aspect of the quests for the historical Jesus, especially the Jesus Seminar in the 1980s and 90s. Situating Thurman's work becomes difficult in the three-quest paradigm. However, at that time, there were many existing works that interpreted the message of Jesus. Thurman observed that existing interpretations of the teachings of Jesus in his time had little to say about the poor in society. This was so because the Christian message had been muffled,

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Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995). Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1973). Ben Witherington III, *What Have They Done with Jesus?* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006). N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996). John D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995). Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1984 and 1998). E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> James L. McDonald, *Audemus*: San Francisco Theological Seminary September 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 6.

confused and left vague.<sup>14</sup> Christianity seems to favor the strong against the weak of society. Even though the Christian religion was born out of persecution and suffering, it neglected its foundations and became “the cornerstone of civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples.”<sup>15</sup> Also, the missionary appeal was “on the basis of the Christian responsibility to the needy, the ignorant, and the so-called backward peoples of the earth.”<sup>16</sup> Christianity expects the adherents to willfully share with others what one had gathered (material or spiritual –for strictly private or personal ends).<sup>17</sup> Thurman sees the sin of pride to have eroded the minds and the wills of people and “tended to vitiate the missionary impulse and to make of it an instrument of self-righteousness on the one hand and racial superiority on the other.”<sup>18</sup> Some of these thoughts made Thurman's interpretation of Jesus challenging to the existing interpretations of Jesus' message and personality.

### Thurman's Bigger Picture of Jesus

To understand the message and the place of Jesus, Thurman considers the neglected roots of the Christian faith. Thurman states, “The Christian Church has tended to overlook its Judaic origins, but the fact is that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew of Palestine when he went about his Father's business, announcing the acceptable year of the Lord.”<sup>19</sup> Thurman compares the social descent and backgrounds of Jesus and Paul, and states that Paul had privileges of the Roman and Jewish rights compared to Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Thurman, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Thurman, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Thurman, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Thurman, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Thurman, pp. 12-3.

<sup>19</sup> Thurman, p. 16. This became the emphasis of the third quest for the historical Jesus. See Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*.

<sup>20</sup> Thurman, p. 17.

Thurman sees Jesus as a poor Jew who also understood the context of the disinherited and identified with them during his ministry, and radically considered their destinies. Jesus has been viewed by Jesus scholars within his socio-economic and religio-cultural context of Palestine as a sage, cynic Jewish peasant, eschatological prophet, and a spirit-filled person, who worked so hard to renew religious beliefs in the Israel community. In Africa, Jesus is seen as an ancestor, elder brother and mediator, king, a revolutionary leader and rural dweller.<sup>21</sup> Jesus belonged to the minority group in Palestine, and his teachings were directed to the people of Israel within the “Greco-Roman world, smarting under the loss of status, freedom, and autonomy, haunted by the dream of the restoration of a lost glory and a former greatness.”<sup>22</sup>

The focus of the struggle was on Israel's political enemy. Thurman writes, “Rome was the enemy; Rome symbolized total frustration; Rome was the great barrier to peace of mind. And Rome was everywhere. No Jewish person of the period

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<sup>21</sup> Thurman, p. 17. In Africa, Jesus is seen as an ancestor, elder brother and mediator, king, a revolutionary leader and rural dweller. See Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990). J. Dogara Gwamna, “‘What do People Say that I Am?’: Interrogating Current Trends in New Testament Studies,” *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 27 (2009). J. Dogara Gwamna, *Perspectives in African Theology* (Bukuru: ACTS, 2008). Charles Nyamiti, “The Trinity: An African Ancestral Perspective,” *Theology Digest* 45 (1998), pp. 21-22. Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000). Charles N. Nyamiti, *Christ Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984). Godwin N. Toryough, “Jesus Christ as a Revolutionary in an African Perspective: An Exegesis of John 2:12-17,” In S. O. Abogunrin, J. O. Akao and D. O. Akintunde and G. N. Toryough, eds., *Christology in African Context* Biblical Studies Series-Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies 2, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Thurman, p. 21. See Mary J. Wade, “In the Light of the Moment: Reverence, Imagination, and Justice,” In Jennifer Castro ed., *I've Got the Power!: Naming and Reclaiming Power as a Force for Good* (Indiana: Women in Leadership Project, 2018), p. 130.

could deal with the question of his practical life, his vocation, his place in society”<sup>23</sup> without settling this concern.

Thurman sees Jesus being human, who was born on earth. He has a name (contrary to Schweitzer who concluded Jesus came without a name apart from the name men gave him).<sup>24</sup> He has forebears; 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.<sup>25</sup> Jesus' deeds and message became the “word and the work of redemption for all the cast-down people in every generation and in every age.”<sup>26</sup>

As briefly stated above, a major emphasis by Thurman in this book was the religion of Jesus. Thurman felt that the religion of Jesus should be examined with against the background of Jesus' age and people, and to inquire into the content of the teaching with reference to the disinherited and the underprivileged.<sup>27</sup> The religion of Jesus was of interest to Thurman. Thurman focused on how such thought might impact the entire Christian society and balance the message of the gospel as exposed in the Christian Bible and emphasized by Vermes in *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*.<sup>28</sup>

In an examination of the religion of Jesus, Karen D. Crozier has it that, “Thurman's re-interpretation of the religion of Jesus which is presented provides Christian spiritual and religious resources to engage contemporary manifestations of racism and white supremacy.”<sup>29</sup> Crozier adds that “Thurman's interpretation of the phrase within the religion of Jesus carried

the meaning of the presence and power of God abiding within a person that contributed to the development of one's interior structures to engage the world as subject.”<sup>30</sup> In such an interpretation of the religion of Jesus in Thurman's thought, according to Crozier, “one sees the integration of spiritual matters with pressing social, existential issues.”<sup>31</sup>

It is necessary that such an integration of spiritual and social matters should be a thing of concern to Christians in Africa and the world at large as Anthony C. Siracusa stated, “The religion of Jesus, not Christianity, should thus be understood in its political context as a method of responding to oppressive and violent ... force.”<sup>32</sup> This leads Sandra R. Mayo to argue that Thurman's work, from a theological perspective, should be part of the curriculum for social justice and reconciliation theories as it will inform our understanding of anti-oppressive frameworks.<sup>33</sup> Thurman summarizes that “The religion of Jesus says to the disinherited: ‘Love your enemy’.”<sup>34</sup> The religion of Jesus should encourage the confrontation and defeat of social inferiority and inequality to provide a healthy society for both the poor and the rich.

Also, Thurman called on those “who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall” to maintain courage, integrity, and dignity in the face of atrocities rather than resorting to fear, deception, and hatred.<sup>35</sup> He insists “the poor,

<sup>23</sup> Thurman, pp. 22-3.

<sup>24</sup> Contrary to Thurman, Albert Schweitzer concluded that Jesus came to us as one without a name, the name men expressed him have become historical parables. See *The Quest*, p. 403.

<sup>25</sup> Thurman, p. 110.

<sup>26</sup> Thurman, pp. 28-9.

<sup>27</sup> Thurman, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Karen D. Crozier, “Appropriating the Prophetic Visions of Du Bois and Thurman: Considerations for the Academy,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 4 (2013), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Crozier, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Crozier, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony C. Siracusa, “Disrupting the Calculation of Violence: James M. Lawson, Jr. and the Politics of Nonviolence” (Master's Thesis at Vanderbilt University, May, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Sandra Richards Mayo, “Chasing the ‘Hounds of Hell’: Howard Thurman's Jesus and the Disinherited as a Curriculum for Racial Justice and Reconciliation,” *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal* 10 (2015), p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Thurman, p. 100.

<sup>35</sup> Sandra Richards Mayo, “Chasing the ‘Hounds of Hell’: Howard Thurman's Jesus and the Disinherited as a Curriculum for Racial Justice and Reconciliation,” *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal* 10 (2015), pp. 1-12.

the disinherited, the dispossessed” must be confronted not as objects for compassion or sympathy, but rather in a reflexive manner that forces people to rethink the possibility of the meaning of religion in the modern world. Such existential condition of “the masses of men who live with their backs constantly against the wall” should make people rethink the meaning of religion and also think anew the preserve of possibility for a knowledge of religion that extends the prospects for a more humane society.<sup>36</sup>

There are other related issues, which Thurman considered significant, including the racial difference, discrimination and the unjust treatment of the African Americans by the influential people in the society. Thurman related such inhumane treatment with the situation of the Jews under the Roman Empire. These attitudes made African Americans feel insecure and vulnerable; hence, they were conquered by their fear and inferiority complex. Jesus experienced the same conditions and therefore has a message for them as well.

In the midst of all, Thurman states that there is always joy for being a child of God. Even in the midst of oppression, there is high hope when people understand that they are children of God. Thurman explicitly explains and applies it to the marginalized and the poor who are oppressed in the society. Thurman states, “The awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power.”<sup>37</sup> This understanding brings consolation and self-worth with powers, gifts, talents, and abilities and a note of integrity to what a poor person does.<sup>38</sup> This, according to Victor Anderson, makes the poor to adopt the “rich vocabularies of the Christian community and construct them in such a way that they pushed beyond narrow meanings peculiar to the inner life of the

community. They functioned for him as languages of social criticism.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Thurman and Anticipated Achievements**

One of the influences of Thurman was the radical motivation and change he brought to the nonviolent civil rights movement that most people today associate with Martin Luther King, Jr. (hereafter, MLK). James L Donald says “In fact, Thurman was the chaplain at Boston University when King came as a graduate student in the early 1950s, and they spent a lot of time together in the years that followed.”<sup>40</sup> Thurman was also connected to the Congress on Racial Equality, one of the more influential civil rights groups in the country at that time.<sup>41</sup> Thurman was also there to advise MLK after an assassination attempt in 1958.

It has been said that MLK carried and read a copy of *Jesus & the Disinherited* during the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. Like W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, Thurman was impacted by (and actively interpreted) the spiritual and cultural expressions by people of African descent. Civil Rights activists at the time drew on the singing tradition of enslaved people and their oppressed descendants to express their hope for community.<sup>42</sup>

One can say that no matter the veracity, its endurance testifies to the critical role Thurman played to give theological ground, coherent intellectual framework,

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<sup>39</sup> Victor Anderson, “Contour of an American Public Theology,” <http://www.livedtheology.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/20010200PPR.02-Victor-Anderson-Contour-of-an-American-Public-Theology.pdf> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> January, 2019].

<sup>40</sup> McDonald, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> R. Drew Smith, “Religion, Race, and the Making of American Global Citizens,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 10 (2012), pp. 5-14.

<sup>42</sup> Cheryl Charline Boots, “Creating community in the American Civil Rights Movement: Singing Spirituals and Freedom Songs” (MA Thesis at the School of Theology, Boston University, 2014), p. 22. Kristopher Burrell, “Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Greater Vision: Bending the Arc of Time towards Justice.” Public Seminar. January 15, 2018. <http://www.publicseminar.org/2018/01/martin-luther-king-jr-s-greater-vision/> [Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January, 2019].

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<sup>36</sup> Corey, pp. 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> Thurman, p. 50.

<sup>38</sup> Thurman, p. 53.

and invigorating spiritual strength to the nascent Civil Rights Movement as discussed in the work of Regis A. Saxton.<sup>43</sup> Saxton adds that “The genius of *Jesus and the Disinherited* is not that it condemns the Church, rather it argues that contained within Jesus’ biography and teachings are the theological tools for liberation. The theology itself is not simply applied to help resolve social problems, fully realized religion of Jesus *is* the solution.”<sup>44</sup> Saxton’s ideas on Thurman have underscored the importance of the religion of Jesus to resolve social issues in the human society.

Thurman’s writings and sermons reveal insightful social commentary on racism, militarism, and suffering which is as relevant and revolutionary today. Billy Michael Honor rightly argues that Thurman was among the most influential African American religious cultural critics in mid-century America. With one foot in evangelical liberalism and another in Christian mysticism, Thurman articulated a “Prophetic Spirituality” that in its mystical and liberal ideological forms captured the imagination of African American religious intelligentsia. The distinct contribution of Thurman was to deploy a hopeful universal perspective, stamped with a prophetic Christian imprimatur, as impetus to moral critique of and struggle against 20<sup>th</sup> century American segregation and racism. Even to this day, Thurman’s commitment to the themes of religious experience, hunger for community, and the realization of an authentic sense of self still inspire persons of all ages, colors, creeds, and religious convictions.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Regis A. Saxton, “Theology, Biography & Social Justice in *Jesus & the Disinherited*” (2014), pp. 4-5. The influence of Thurman to social movements and congregations is chronicled in Luther Smith, *Howard Thurman Essential Writings compilation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), pp. 23, 28-32.

<sup>44</sup> Saxton, p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> Billy Michael Honor, “The Critical Christ: Understanding the theological cultural criticism of Howard Thurman and James Cone” <http://files.stablerack.com/WebFiles/81293/TheCriticalChrist.pdf> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> January, 2019].

Thurman’s interpretation of Jesus in *Jesus and the Disinherited* demonstrates this mind-set particularly the explication breaks from traditional theological categories and positions Jesus as a “religious subject rather than a religious object.” This radical transvaluation denotes Jesus to be a fellow participant and exemplar in community as opposed to a relic or icon over and above the community.<sup>46</sup>

Thurman’s work has succeeded in challenging societal menace for generations. It contributes to a sense of belonging for African Americans. Moreover, it has the capacity to lend a coherent defense for them as they protect their lives in the midst of the offending influential people. The legacy laid by Thurman could help curb insecurity in the society, a situation Jesus himself found inevitable to his cultural and societal identities.

### **The Disinherited in an Inherited Context in Africa**

Thurman’s main question in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* remains relevant for the inherited in Africa and Nigeria. What does the religion of Jesus say about the disinherited in Africa? Does the religion of Jesus and its message have a place for these people? What about the “inherited” who are being disinherited in the societies by foreigners? Within the Nigerian context, this essay has used the word “inherited” to mean the owners of the land who have been disinherited by the Fulani people who are claiming inheritance of the land. This has rendered many Nigerians “disinherited” in the Middle Belt region although they are the indigenous people of the land.

In a study about Jesus and the poor in Nigeria, J. Dogara Gwamna considers Jesus to be contextualist *par excellence* in the approach to life and the poor during his

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony Sean Neal, “Howard Thurman as Philosopher,” *The American Philosophical Association* 17 (2018), pp. 1-6.

ministry.<sup>47</sup> Gwamna sees Jesus to have concentrated on the physical and spiritual needs of the poor in the society, a concern Thurman discussed in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Gwamna challenges the church to reconsider the interpretation of the message of Jesus for Africa.<sup>48</sup> It now becomes necessary for the message and religion of Jesus, as argued by Thurman, to be understood by many Africans in their societies.

Today, there is rapid growth of the inherited being disinherited in Africa. Nigeria is becoming socially unstable particularly in the Middle Belt. Historically, the Hausa-Fulani people migrated and came to the Middle Belt of Nigeria for trade during the pre-colonial days but many of them who migrated want to rule the indigenous people today.<sup>49</sup> This unjust situation is rapidly increasing as armed people (most times not military but in military uniforms) come to wipe out entire communities in the name of "communal clash," take their lands and rule the owners of the lands.<sup>50</sup> A large number of people are handicapped and cannot stand and defend themselves following their struggles. They have become objects in the hands of the rich and the elite.

In Nigeria, politics is dominating the minds of people and the politicians have carved territories for themselves at the expense of the poor. The politicians deceive the poor to support them and use

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<sup>47</sup> J. Dogara Gwamna, "The 'Poor' in Biblical Perspective: A Challenge to Diakonia," *Perspectives in African Theology* (Bukuru: ACTS, 2008), p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Gwamna, 'Poor', p.30.

<sup>49</sup> Turaki, *Historical Roots*, 22. Also see, Yusufu Turaki, *The British Colonial Legacy in Northern Nigeria: A Social Ethical Analysis of the Colonial and Post-Colonial Society and Politics in Nigeria* (Jos: Yusuf Turaki Foundation, 2017), pp. 65-69.

<sup>50</sup> C. I. Ndubuisi, "A Critical Analysis of Conflicts Between Herdsmen and Farmers in Nigeria: Causes and socio-religious and political effects on national development", *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.5065>.

them to achieve their aims and leave them helpless after elections. They use money and power to rig elections to enable them exert power and influence over the poor.<sup>51</sup> This situation is egregious, for example, in the recently concluded federal and state elections in the country.<sup>52</sup> Most of the poor people ensured that these leaders are elected despite living with their 'backs against the walls.' The enlightened ones within the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) and other States, for example, did not vote for the incumbent President and his government during the just concluded elections but most of the poor people in the Northern States (e.g. Kano, Katsina, Jigawa, Zamfara, Yobe and Sokoto) worked to ensure that the President returns to power.<sup>53</sup>

Since the All Progressive Congress took the mantle of leadership 2015, Nigeria has become a land wherein indigenous people do not have authority and rights over their inheritance. The situation is becoming fierce in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The incessant killings in

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<sup>51</sup> Halimah Yahaya, "INEC server shows Buhari lost Presidential Election with 1.6 million votes, Atiku, PDP claim" <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/321177-inec-server-shows-buhari-lost-presidential-election-with-1-6-million-votes-atiku-pdp-claim.html> [posted 20th March, 2019 and accessed 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2019]. Samson Toromode, "'We have original results,' PDP rejects INEC's Presidential Election Result" <https://www.pulse.ng/news/politics/pdp-rejects-presidential-elections-result-announced-by-inec/gecn8er> [Accessed 25th May, 2019].

<sup>52</sup> Gani Yoroms, "Electoral Violence, Arms Proliferations and Electoral Security in Nigeria: Lessons from the Twenty-Five Elections for Emerging Democracies" <https://www.inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Conference-Paper-by-Gani-Yoroms.pdf> [Accessed 26th May, 2019].

<sup>53</sup> "Nigeria Presidential Elections Results 2019" <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-f0b25208-4a1d-4068-a204-940cbe88d1d3> [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2019].



Benue, Kaduna and Plateau are efforts to dominate and disinherit the inherited.<sup>54</sup>

In a study, Yusufu Turaki explains the causes of the killings in the Middle Belt of Nigeria to be associated with what is called the 'Northern syndrome.' The North wants to always be in power. The North has always considered non-northerners as slaves.<sup>55</sup> Many Hausa-Fulani people consider themselves superior to other tribes in Nigeria.

This superior-inferior dichotomy creates a lot of socio-economic and religious problems in the societies and always result in violence. Turaki states that "the bulk of crises and conflicts in Northern Nigeria and anywhere in the world are usually deeply rooted in ethnic, land, religious and cultural matters."<sup>56</sup> In places where they are in the majority, there are fewer or no cases of violence. But there is a high concentration of violence in places where they are minorities. There is always the challenge of land because their occupied portion of land would not contain them. The violence usually makes indigenous people or Christians flee and leave their burnt houses. The people of Southern Kaduna, Benue and the Plateau accepted the Hausa-Fulani but today they want to take control of their ancestral lands and conquer even their cultures and religions. This problem has been

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<sup>54</sup> Mark Amaza and Commentary, "A widening conflict between herdsmen and farmers is redefining Nigeria's geopolitics" <https://qz.com/africa/1204744/nigeria-fulani-herdsmen-clashes-are-redefining-its-geopolitics/> [posted 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2018 and accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2019]. Yomi Kazeem, "The latest clash between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria has left more than 200 dead" <https://qz.com/africa/1315817/plateau-attacks-more-than-200-killed-in-herdsmen-farmers-clash/> [posted 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2018 and accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2019].

<sup>55</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *Tainted Legacy: Islam, Colonialism and Slavery in Northern Nigeria* (McLean, VA: Isaac Publishing, 2010), pp. 75-110.

<sup>56</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *Historical Roots of Ethno-Religious Crises and Conflicts in North Nigeria* (Jos: Challenge Press, 2017), p. 7.

transferred to the Western and Southern parts of Nigeria. Hausa-Fulani influences are felt in these parts of the country as they try to disinherit the inherited in their own lands.

Also, complicating matters, some among the Muslims have killed people (infidels) in the name of Allah. The so-called "Jihad" led by Usman dan Fodio is taking shape in the Nigerian government.<sup>57</sup> Christians are left with very few options and must navigate these societal manipulations and dominations. People, particularly Christians, are concerned with a variety of ways in civic, social, religious, political, and other contexts.<sup>58</sup> The inability to understand these contexts and properly relate with them has caused conflicts "fostering a polarization or fractionalization of a previously more unified community."<sup>59</sup> These are some of the concerns Christians are facing in Nigeria and some other parts of Africa.

Although Africans have a long and varied history of perspectives and experiences of Jesus as chronicled by Michael L. Cook, it becomes integral for

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<sup>57</sup> Christian O. Ele, "Islamization of Nigeria: Implications for Sustainable Peace" *International Journal of Social Sciences and English Literature* 2 (2018), pp. 13-19. DOI: 10.20448/journal.527.2018.21.13.19 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327397931\\_Islamization\\_of\\_Nigeria\\_Implications\\_for\\_Sustainable\\_Peace](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327397931_Islamization_of_Nigeria_Implications_for_Sustainable_Peace) [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2019]. "Islamist terrorism: Obasanjo, Soyinka on point" <https://punchng.com/islamist-terrorism-obasanjo-soyinka-on-point/> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2019]. 'Boko Haram Is For West African Fulanization, African Islamization', Says Obasanjo <http://saharareporters.com/2019/05/18/boko-haram-west-african-fulanization-african-islamization-says-obasanjo> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2019].

<sup>58</sup> On how to confront the existential and theoretical demands of life see Charles H. Long, "The Oppressive Elements in Religion and the Religions of the Oppressed" in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora: The Davies Group, 1995), p. 173.

<sup>59</sup> Robert R. Stains, "Cultivating Courageous Communities through the Practice and Power of Dialogue," *Mitchell Hamline Law Review* 42 (2016), pp. 1525-6.

Jesus to be felt in a social context not just in the religious context.<sup>60</sup> There is a need for an emphasis on social Christology among Nigerian Christians. Nigerians require a coherent response to violence and suppression by foreigners over the inherited in the society. Like Thurman, Reggie L. Williams warns, "Christianity that emphasizes creeds over praxis within its interpretation of Christ is prone to a conceptual faith that ignores lived reality and is likely to appropriate Christ for harmful political agendas."<sup>61</sup> These words should be internalized and aggressively actualized.

The religion of Jesus should carry a message for the poor. Thurman's re-interpretation should help the poor and the disinherited in Africa to conquer their fears and challenge the deceptive situations they have lived with over the years. It should help them conquer their hatred and adopt love as a yardstick for societal existence. Equity in society should be the focus on the earth as it would be in heaven. The child of God syndrome as deduced by Thurman should console the disinherited in the African society knowing fully that there is a bright side of life, which awaits children of God.

## Conclusion

While historical Jesus scholars have been more concerned with the humanity of Jesus, interpretation of Jesus' words, the kingdom and reign to come, Thurman presented a radical Jesus, who defended and uplifted the disinherited in the society. Such a view of Jesus highlights the focus of his personality and message in the midst of human despair. It challenges the basis for Jesus coming to the earth and the incarnation of Jesus as identifying with the poor. Thurman gave an alternative interpretation of the

message of Jesus for the disinherited in the society. His work challenges injustice, racism, segregation and discrimination between the weak and strong in the society and gives a sense of dignity to follower of the religion of Jesus. Such a basis raised by Thurman would erase inequality in the church and the society, particularly in Nigeria and some parts of Africa. The ideas presented by Thurman clearly would enlighten African Christians on the Islamic plan in Nigeria. It might be of special interest to those experiencing domination and forced disinheritance. Perhaps it will prompt a search for better solutions for our socio-political struggles irrespective of the religious differences. Thurman sees Jesus as a spiritual and a social figure, who lived as a Jew within a Jewish society dominated by Rome culture. Such a socio-spiritual perspective of life is the true religion Jesus left for people to emulate irrespective of race, gender, colour and religion. Practicing such a religion would make the elites and the disinherited experience equity in any arm of the human society.

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<sup>60</sup> Michael L. Cook, "The African Experience of Jesus," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009), pp. 668-92.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, p. 38.

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