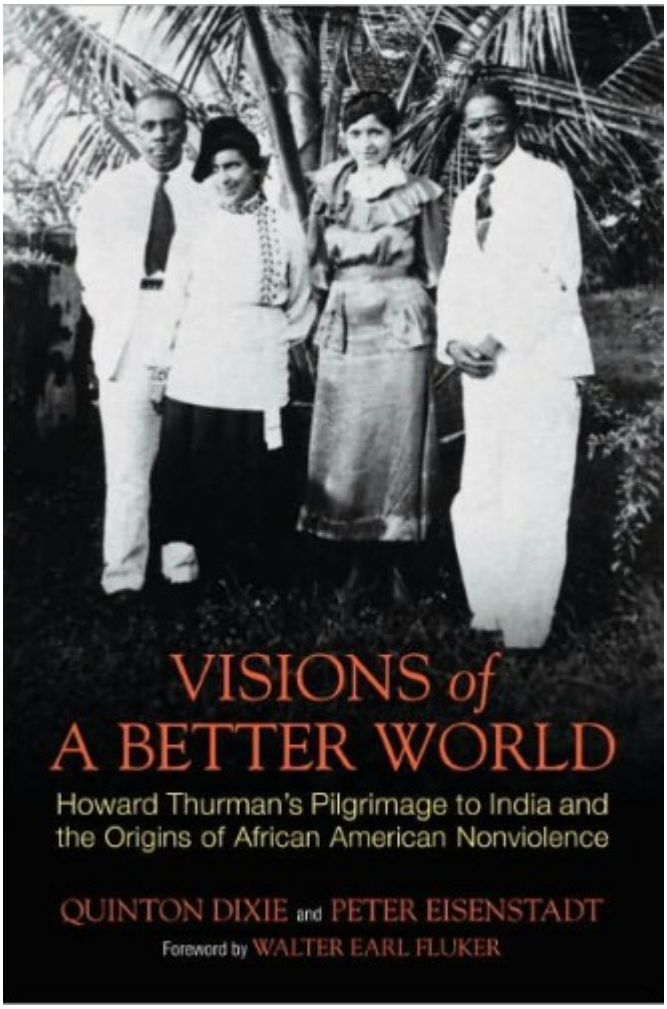
Visions of a Better World, by Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt

reviewed by Patricia Appelbaum in the May 30, 2012 issue

In Review



Visions of a Better World

By Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt
Beacon

In 1942 a reporter from an “influential black newspaper” noted that Howard Thurman was “not sufficiently known to the general public.” Thurman was at that time a professor and dean of the chapel at Howard University, a leader in the

Fellowship of Reconciliation and a very active lecturer. Black opinion makers speculated cautiously that he might be the person to lead a nonviolent freedom movement. Yet he was then and he remains less well known than his status and public witness might imply. And his most enduring books appeared only after 1945, when he was already in his mid-forties.

Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt focus on the first half of Thurman's life, finding there not only the deep and complex roots of his mature works, but also a far-reaching influence on historical events and actors. Both authors are historians and editors of the Howard Thurman Papers Project. Unlike earlier biographies, their work draws extensively on manuscripts and publications that were not widely circulated. The first two chapters survey Thurman's early years and formation. The central section describes his trip to India from genesis to completion. The remainder of the book delves more deeply into that experience and its consequences.

Thurman himself said that his trip to India, in 1935 and 1936, was a turning point in his life. This book argues that it shaped his advocacy of racial equality, spiritual power and nonviolent revolution. Clearly he learned much from his six months there and from his meetings with Mohandas Gandhi and the scholar of religion Kshiti Mohan Sen. But the authors think that the crucial event for Thurman was a moment of epiphany at the Khyber Pass. There he began to see India as a model for the Christian church: spiritually intense, yet plural and flexible. This experience, they tell us, crystallized his sense of the need for a new kind of Christianity, rebuilt from the ground up and intentionally interracial—a spiritual fellowship that could generate a new society.

Over the next decade, say the authors, Thurman struggled to work out an intellectual and religious framework for the social change he envisioned. Their discussion of this process is perhaps overly condensed. But their task was not easy: Thurman's thought incorporated ideas from the political left, the black intelligentsia, the social gospel, neoorthodoxy and Jeffersonian democratic ideals, as well as "visceral" insights from India about race and imperialism.

He was equally concerned with practice. Like his pacifist contemporaries, he recognized the limits of reasoned persuasion and struggled toward moral consistency in an imperfect world. The authors argue that Thurman's ministry at the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, beginning in 1943, was the expression of his lifelong religious commitment and the culmination of the India trip. It was an

attempt to create and model the interracial Christian community he had imagined. Their historical account exposes the spadework that went into the church's founding, as well as its growth, tensions and qualified success.

A highlight of the book is its treatment of Thurman's oral communication. The authors make the insightful point that his public speaking, teaching and mentoring constituted a significant body of work. From news reports, letters and memoirs, they unfold a careful and creative reconstruction of Thurman's speaking and its impact. Thurman did not use what we think of as a traditional African-American preaching style, though he did draw on educated black exemplars. Instead, his speech was "elevated, dense, allusive," poetic and difficult. Yet many listeners remembered a quality of intimacy to his discourse, a sense that he was "speaking to them personally." He was popular with both black and white audiences. While he rarely spoke directly about racial issues, he was conscious, especially before white audiences, that "his speech was about race before he opened his mouth."

The sense of intimacy and engagement in his public speaking was also part of his skill as a mentor to young adults. "Mentorship," the authors comment, "is even more ephemeral than sermonic performance," but they find ample testimony to Thurman's care for individuals and small groups as a pastor, professor and conference leader. Among his many significant protégés were Pauli Murray and James Farmer, pioneers of Gandhian activism in the early 1940s.

Throughout the book the authors trace political and religious themes that engaged Thurman through most of his life—among them the "religion of Jesus," mystical spirituality and women's equality. I particularly appreciated their ironic eye on spirituals. By Thurman's time these vernacular hymns were apparently becoming something of a racially tinged cliché, and he was frequently irritated by requests to perform them. We are left to imagine how those experiences shaped his two books on spirituals.

The book is marred a bit by editorial lapses in quotation and usage. Information drawn from published sources occasionally loses something in the transition; for example, the discussion of the India trip seems to dismiss the multitalented E. Stanley Jones as just another evangelist, whereas Thurman's autobiography provides a more nuanced description. The endnotes would be easier to use if the publisher had provided running heads with page references.

On more substantive matters, the authors insist throughout that Thurman's Christianity was unconventional, but I wonder if they have overstated their case. Certainly he arrived at a unitarian Christology and experienced powerful spiritual communion with non-Christians. And it is true that the covenants at Fellowship Church became increasingly interreligious over time. But Christian liberals always lived near interreligious boundaries, and Thurman did continue to identify himself as a Christian. Even though he resisted alignments with orthodox confessions and institutions, he can be located within an American tradition of nondoctrinal mystical Protestantism.

I wonder, too, if the authors' careful historical account of Thurman's early life undermines their own argument to some extent. As they note, the roots of his political thought went back to the early 1920s. He knew of Gandhi's work from both African-American and pacifist sources and must have known Richard Gregg's practical interpretations of Gandhi as well. His misgivings about traditional Christianity reached back into childhood and took shape during his studies with Rufus Jones in 1929. Might he have come to much the same place in the world without visiting India at all?

But to ask this question is to second-guess history. The fact is that he did go, and it did have an indisputable effect on him—and through him, on countless others. Dixie and Eisenstadt have provided a unique and compelling account of Thurman's formation and influence.