

## Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Howard Thurman, and Josiah Royce

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**ABSTRACT:** Martin Luther King's primary emphasis was upon 'beloved community,' a phrase he borrowed from Royce, but an idea that he shared with St. Augustine. Theories of the state tend to focus upon division, in which one stratum dominates another or others. King's context is the US in the segregated South—a region whose internal divisions sharply instantiate the idea of the state as an unequal hierarchy of dominance. King's appeal was less to end black subjugation than to end subjugation as such. Hence King was called by some a 'dreamer,' given his background commitment to equality and community, ideals taking marginal precedence over his foreground commitment to liberty and autonomy. This article explores the notion of 'beloved community' broadly and then specifically in Martin Luther King along with related notions in Howard Thurman (1900-1981) and in Josiah Royce (1855-1916).

**Keywords:** Martin Luther King; Howard Thurman; Josiah Royce; Beloved Community; Equality; Desegregation.

### Introduction

In as far as concepts drive political engagement, the key concept driving Martin Luther King's engagement was that of 'beloved community'. The term was not his invention, but is best known due to his embrace. King's ownership of 'community' touched upon an ethic of equality. King often alluded to freedom, as in the quest to be 'free, free at last'. And though freedom and equality are often deployed as mutually antipathetic, King saw the two as mutually supportive – like a pawl and the ratchet wheel whose teeth it engages. For King, freedom in abstraction from equality was vain, absurd, unthinkable. Freedom for him was sustained by community, not denied by community; nurtured in community, but sunk in nullity, taken on its own. Community, in some of its various forms, can of course be oppressive. Edmund Burke's 'little platoon' - the family, the suffocating locality, the smug little church in a backwater bayou, the blood-spattered police in a small Pol-Pot state - can block the light and stifle all efflorescence. That is only another way of saying that 'community' is burdened with divergent meanings and reference. For King, in his own experience, community was the nutrient of persons, the defense of persons, and the well-spring of his own 'personalism'. For King, persons were centers of consciousness and points of light. It was persons who aspired to know and thus to grow. It was persons who bore moral agency, were bathed in dignity, and required respect. Personality for King was not a denial but an affirmation of community – a community that nurtures and respects personhood.

King's communalism was marked by love of, reverence for, personhood; nor did he think it possible that any mere individual could defend this and hold it aloft on his own. What King espoused then was not just any community, for community could be counterfeit. What he embraced in particular was beloved community, which was a society of friends, a colloquy of equals, a practice of concern, caring, and giving - in which each person had standing, each stone in place, none rejected, in a rising tumult of aspiring mutuality. Obviously King's construct of community had a strikingly religious edge and aura. This is to say no more than that his radical communitarianism was served up as the obverse of its conservative rivals. King's religiosity has an aura because of the infinity of its reach and dimensions. Conservative counterparts, like

Burke's diminutive platoons, are bounded, particular, as in the focus upon a given confession, or tribe, or family, or nation. If time and space are not bounded; more relevantly, if outreach, charity, and allegiance are not bounded; then King's communitarianism has edge because it cannot be named, cannot be confined. King's concept of community retains only the affection of locality, not its frontiers, not its exclusions and choke points. King's concept of beloved community plainly adverts to an ideal, but it also extends to lived experience, such as he located in the black church of his day. There lies in all this a confounding of the ideal and the real, such that it is impossible to say that King is merely to do with one to the exclusion of the other. King was perfectly familiar with St Augustine's *City of God*. His notion of beloved community implicates ambiguous cleavage between two cities, terrestrial and celestial; between two referents, real and ideal. Hence King's un-Burkean cosmopolitanism, embracing every stranger as frater or soror. For King as with Donne: no person was an island. No nation was an island. In this way, King's notion of beloved community traffics with ancient elements, but most especially with friendship, and inclusion beyond the city's gates.

Although the genius of Martin Luther King, Jr. is distinctive, neither is it an island. King is a world historical figure because of the way he combined thought with action, galvanizing the political behavior of so many who came with and after him, helping to ensure a fundamental change in the laws of his country, and in the ways his fellow countrymen came to think and act. The past can never be altogether abstracted from the present. And 'past' ideas tumultuously occupy the present. 'Beloved community' was one of those phrases and aspirations that King shared, helter-skelter, with many contemporaries and predecessors. The present account looks at and beyond King, to explore some part of the intellectual and cultural platform on which he stands. Particular attention, in this regard, is paid to Howard Thurman and to Josiah Royce – in that (chronological) order. The present concern is not to demonstrate that any precise sequence in which one major thinker merely subtends from another. Rather it is to show in a limited way how a family or community of ideas may extend and spread through temporal periods and societal clusters, rather like the effect of a rock cast upon the waters.

### **Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)**

In his December 1956 Address to the Montgomery Improvement Association at the Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, King claimed that the boycott and its achievements did not in themselves represent the goal of the struggle: "The end is reconciliation, the end is redemption," King said, "the end is the creation of the beloved community" (*Papers*, 3:136). In his 1957 "Birth of a New Nation" speech, King suggested that the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation. The aftermath of violence is "emptiness and bitterness." In his 1966 "Non-violence: The Only Road to Freedom," which he intended as a defense of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's position on nonviolent resistance, King claimed that "only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men can live together without fear. Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives" (1991: 58). Although it may seem that King's 1966 argument in defense of nonviolent resistance and his reference to the beloved community is perfectly consistent with his earlier pronouncements apropos the logic of the beloved community, things had changed considerably between 1956 and 1966.

Whereas the young pastor in Montgomery initially wished merely to incrementally adjust the systems and institutions of racial inequality from within, minor improvements here and there, Harding claims—in *Martin Luther King: Inconvenient Hero*—that by 1966 King had begun to struggle against the distinct possibility that the entire system was beyond repair or redemption. Although King believed that “hope is necessary for creativity and spirituality” in 1967, King admitted, later that same year, that he was “not totally optimistic” because he understood that “in order for this to happen, it will be necessary to give up or sacrifice something” (1967: 256; Burrow, 2015: 135). “These final years of King’s life and ministry,” writes Fluker, “though beleaguered with controversy and sabotage, are the most crucial in understanding the maturation of his personal and intellectual growth in respect to community. It is in this period that one sees most clearly King’s wrestling with nonviolence as a means of achieving human community, his increased realization of the international implications of his vision, and his understanding of the nature and role of conflict in the realization of human community (1990: 39; in King, see 1986: 253-358). But even then, in a 1966 article, King wrote:

I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think that end of that objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community (1984: 234).

King’s minimalist description of the beloved community refers to a psychic state or quality of experience if not a geographical home within which persons might simply “live together without fear.” King thought that it was possible to affirm a “broad universalism” as consistent with “genuine intergroup and interpersonal living” (1963: 23) disclosed at “the center of the gospel” (*Papers*, 3: 418). Indeed, King found it instructive—in his last publication, *Where Do We Go from Here?*—to quote Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative, i.e., that “all human beings must be treated as ends and never as mere means” (1968: 97), and allude to his third formulation, i.e., “act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends.”

There are others, however, including Marsh and Burrow, who insist that “the logic of King’s dream was theologically specific: beloved community as the realization of divine love in lived social relation” (Marsh, 2005: 3). Fluker agrees that “the theological dimension of the ‘beloved community’ is primary for King” (1989: 159). “The beloved community concept was for King more than an operative or regulative principle, although it was also this,” writes Rufus Burrow, “*King was of man of the Christian faith*” (2015: 124). Marsh argues that “King’s vision of the beloved community was grounded in a specific theological tradition and no amount of postmodern complexity can remove that intention or claim” (2005: 6). Walter Fluker put it this way:

King’s vision of the beloved community, like Thurman’s, however [i.e., despite his acknowledged indebtedness to various intellectual traditions], was also bred and nurtured in the black church tradition, which has historically seen its particular struggle for the liberation of black people through the prism of universal liberation of all peoples (1990: 37).

Fluker elaborates: “The universal themes of forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope which characterized King’s and Thurman’s vision of community have always been fundamental to the black community in general and the black church in particular” (1990: 37; also see Cone, 1984: 416). Similar to King, Thurman actively but nonviolently resisted the injustices inherent in materialism, militarism, and racism. In December 1961, King proclaimed: “We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization. There is still a voice crying out in terms that echo across the generations, saying: ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, that you may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven.’” Many sought what the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] described as a “circle of trust, a band of sisters and brothers gathered around the possibilities of agapeic love, the beloved community” (1962). To redeem means to rehabilitate,” claimed Diane Nash, “to heal, to reconcile rather than gain power.” In 1957, in a sermon on Gandhi, described agapeic love as “understanding, redeeming goodwill for all”

In 1963, just weeks following the March on Washington, King optimistically suggested that “it was time to move from protest to reconciliation.” But reconciliation proved to be difficult. Beloved community requires a “committed empathy with all the oppressed and a divine dissatisfaction with all forms of injustice” (1968b: 211-212). King claimed in one of his final speeches, as a paean to Du Bois, that we are “still challenged to be dissatisfied”:

Let us be dissatisfied until every [person] can have food and material necessities for his body, culture and education for his mind, freedom and human dignity for his spirit. Let us be dissatisfied until rat-infested, vermin-filled slums will be a thing of a dark past and every family will have a decent, sanitary house in which to live. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until brotherhood is no longer a meaningless word at the end of a prayer but the first order of business on every legislative agenda. Let us be dissatisfied until our brother of the Third World – Asia, Africa, and Latin America – will no longer be the victim of imperialist exploitation, but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy, and disease.

But the dissatisfaction that King expressed in 1968, e.g., in Atlanta, or 1966, in Chicago, was also on display in his 1963 ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, where King stated that “we can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity” (1984: 218). King’s dream of a beloved community extended beyond sectarian allegiances to a nonsectarian and cosmopolitan sibilinghood of persons (Garrow, 1989: 80).

“Although King’s conception of the ‘beloved community’ represents a synthesis from a wide range of thinkers,” suggests Fluker, “a simple working definition is a community ordered by love” (1990: 39). And while there has been a tendency among King scholars to focus on either the formal or informal influences on King’s development, e.g., between the technical language of Boston personalism or the theological fineries of Paul Tillich on the one hand or “the religion of Ebenezer Church” on the other, Burrow argues that “both are important for one who seeks a

fuller, more thorough understanding of King and his work” (2015: 122).<sup>1</sup> Black churches provided a structure-function of hope, derived from the “the context of hundreds of years of slavery and suffering,” writes Cone, “that prevented despair from becoming the defining characteristic of the lives by looking forward to God’s coming, eschatological freedom” (1984: 419; also see Raboteau 1978: 251). Cone argues that “[t]he white public and also many white scholars have misunderstood King, because they know so little about the black church community, ignoring its effect upon his life and thought” (1984: 414). Similarly, Lewis Baldwin claims that the “failure of many scholars to recognize that King’s genius was folk, black, and southern may be attributed in large measure to racism and to some extent southern bias (1991: 3). Perhaps this is less true of Thurman’s genius, but Baldwin’s main contention is well taken when it comes to exploring Thurman’s thought. Though most of the philosophical aspects of King’s beloved community ethic already existed in Royce,” Burrow insists that “King went well beyond Royce in characterizing the actual concrete nature of such a community, as well as proposing and consistently applying a method—nonviolent direct action—for achieving it” (2015: 125). King made a similar contribution to the American personalist tradition. But Burrow also contends that “even before his arrival at Crozer Theological Seminary and later at Boston University, King was already quite familiar with the idea expressed by the beloved community, even if he did not then know the term” (130). Indeed, Walter Fluker goes so far as to say that “community is the single, organizing principle of King’s life and thought” (1989: 159; also 1990: 43). Until the very end, again Fluker, “King maintained the belief that authentic community would come to America through the redemptive struggles of black Americans and others who dared to follow their glorious example” (1989: 187). But for King, back in 1956, as a preacher and a philosopher as well as a social activist, the nonviolent spirit indicative of the beloved community is both a means and an end, both a method and a creed, a socioethical maxim but also a metaphysical principle: “It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love that will bring about miracles in the hearts of men [and women]” (*Papers*, 3: 136).

### Howard Thurman (1900-1981)

The term [viz., the beloved community] has a soft and sentimental ring. It conjures an image of tranquility, peace, and the utter absence of struggle and of all things that irritate and disturb. But my thought is far from such a utopian surmise. . . . Disagreements will be real and

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<sup>1</sup> There is an entire body of literature among Anglicans on the beloved community in the 1920 and 1930s. Thurman would have gotten a good dose of Rauschenbusch, himself influenced by Royce, maybe even filtered through Benjamin Elijah Mays’s selections in *A Gospel for the Social Awakening: Selections from Rauschenbusch*, while at Rochester Seminar. Rauschenbusch argued that the ideal community “at every stage of development, tends toward a social order that will best guarantee to all personalities their freest and highest development” (1917: 142). There is also a good deal of talk about the beloved community “in the broader currency” among the socialists and communists of the time as well as a host of American liberal Protestants (e.g., Buttrick, Johnson, Lyman, and Ward, also people associated with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist organization, plus some social critics at Columbia University, e.g., Randolph Bourne’s writings in *The Radical Will* (1918), and Dewey’s early writings about the Great Community, to which Thurman must have been exposed, at least peripherally, during the summer of 1922. Bourne makes reference to “the good life of the personality lived in the environment of the beloved community”. Roger Lloyd wrote *The Beloved Community* in 1937. Mumford’s *Golden Day* uses the trope. In an essay on the philosophy of religion at Boston University, taught by Brightman, King cited *Religious Values* (1925), where Brightman wrote that “the supreme consummation of worship as well as the very soul and purpose of the universe is the Community of Love, or, as Royce calls it, the Beloved Community.”

germane to the vast undertaking of man's becoming at home in his world and under the eaves of his brother's house" (Thurman, 1966: 206).

Lewis Baldwin claimed that "King's vision of world community was parallel to, and largely derived from, the vision of Mays and Thurman" (1992: 257). Howard Thurman acknowledged a certain indebtedness to Josiah Royce's conception of the beloved community as well as to his philosophy of loyalty. The influence of Royce on King's conception of the beloved community is contested, of course, but scholars readily concede that Royce's ideas exerted, as Rufus Burrow puts it, "at least an indirect influence on King's socioethical thought." In a 1951 lecture series in Marsh Chapel at Boston University on the philosophy of loyalty, Thurman acknowledged his indebtedness to Josiah Royce, whom he described as "that great, winsome, and sometimes devastating philosopher [who] stated for the first time in the English language, and definitively, the philosophy of loyalty" (1951A). Not altogether unlike G. W. F. Hegel before him, Royce expresses the philosophy of loyalty in terms of a submission or sublimation process that resolves the thesis of internal singularity and its antithesis for supplying a dynamic synthesis and source of inner strength. Thurman claimed that "the ghost of Royce had been moving in and out of his mind for many years" (1951A). Although he acknowledged an indebtedness to Royce on the philosophy of loyalty, Thurman spoke, as he put it, "on his own authority." Thurman emphasizes the transformative process that occurs when one submits or surrenders one's will, construed as the 'fluid nerve center of consent.' Thurman is interested in the 'economy of conversion': the psychosocial or spiritual process by which one becomes "a living 'for-instance' of the cause to which he or she is loyal." Thurman describes loyalty as "a willing and thoroughgoing devotion of the person to a cause" (1951A). Thurman also suggests that "our loyalty to the individual is derivate because the thing that is primary is my devotion to the tie that unites me to you and you and you and you" (1951A).

Thurman thought that both Royce and James, despite their differences, were instructive when it came to parsing the psychosocial dynamics at work within religion. Beyond his writings on religion as well as on psychology and philosophy, Thurman was exposed to Royce and James through his colleagues at Morehouse College and Howard University, especially W.E.B. Du Bois in Atlanta and Alain Locke in Washington, both of whom studied at Harvard with James and Royce. Locke's earliest musings on multiculturalism and pluralism were stimulated, at least in part William James's *The Pluralistic Universe*. As colleagues at Howard University, Locke and Thurman envisioned the beloved community as exemplifying a "harmony that transcends all diversities and in which diversity finds its richness and significance" (1971: 6). And Du Bois, who influenced Thurman during the Morehouse years, first as a student and later as a colleague, was at least initially considered to be a pragmatist of a certain type. (The first course that Thurman taught at Morehouse was guided by Dewey's pragmatism and philosophy of education.) So while there were philosophical influences, including Royce and James, at least through Locke and Du Bois, but also through the Boston personalists, Thurman's unique formulation of the "beloved community" expresses what he considered to be the logic of non-exclusionism "inherent in the genius of the Christian faith itself." "Personality is something more than mere individuality," wrote Thurman, "it is the fulfillment of the logic of individuality in community" (1978: 17). Perhaps his work with the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco (1942-1952) serves as a pragmatic lens through which to clarify the ideal of the beloved community in Thurman. "For Thurman," writes Walter E. Fluker, "community refers to integration, mutuality, and harmony" (1990: 39).

Beyond the “legal aspect of integration,” which involves changes in policies and regulations, and understood as a mechanical movement from segregation to desegregation to integration, Thurman emphasizes a “second meaning of integration that has to do with the quality of human relations” ([1966]2009: 205). Thurman described the “dynamic meaning of integration” in 1966 this way:

During the years when the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco was being developed, it became increasingly clear that the mere presence of people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds in the membership did not mean that the church itself was integrated. The coming together of people in such institutions must be rooted in natural communal association. They must be able to participate meaningfully in the various phases of their living if their relationship is to be positive and creative. Meaningful experiences of integration between people are more compelling than the fears, the inhibitions, the dogmas, or the prejudices that divide. *If such unifying experiences can be multiplied over an extended time, they will be able to restructure the fabric of the social context* ([1966]: 2009: 206, our italics).

Thurman sought to build a beloved community as “a living confirmation” or “empirical validation” of what he considered to be “a profound religious and ethical insight concerning the genius of the church as a religious fellowship” (21). While Thurman’s vision of the beloved community was born out of his struggle to understand and subsequent resolve to dedicate his life to breaking down the exclusionary barriers that segregated, de facto if not de jure, white from black Christian churches, the situation in San Francisco in 1944 broadened his vision of or glimpse into a radically non-exclusionary spiritual community. “Community cannot for long feed on itself,” wrote Thurman, in *The Growing Edge*, “it can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond, their unknown and undiscovered brothers and sisters” (1956). Thurman’s *Footprints of a Dream* recounts the origins and results of his experiment in community-building, which put to the test his working hypothesis, namely, that “a way could be found to unite people of great ideological and religious diversity through experiences which were more compelling than the concepts that separated and divided” (1959: 28). The spiritual disciplines must come together when it comes to the work of reconciliation. The clue to the communal is the individual; and the clue to the individual is the communal. But for Thurman and King as well as Royce, the sphere of the communal also includes a transcendent yet somehow still immanent “third dimension.” In our struggle for community, thought all three thinkers, we have a “cosmic companion” (see Mikelson, 1990 and Fluker, 2009: 233; in King, 1960: 441). It is possible to adopt ‘beloved community’ as a socioethical ideal without adopting the metaphysical or theological ideas originally associated with that term, it certainly seems worthwhile to notice that, in each case, their image of God reflects their socioethical teachings: But Thurman’s assertion about the love of God holds for all three: “it is always concerned with breaking the sense of isolation that the individual human spirit feels as it lives its way into life” (1956: 65).

Lawrence N. Jones and Rufus Burrow, among others, have suggested that “blacks have been searching for the beloved community for as long as they have been in this country” (Jones, 1981: 12; Burrow, 2015: 134). In ways analogous to Royce, Thurman believed that individuation consisted in expressions of sincere loyalty to some communal cause. “Commitment means that it is possible for a [person] to yield the nerve center of [his or her] consent to a purpose or a

cause, a movement or an ideal, which may be more important to him [or her] than whether he [or she] lives or dies.” Thurman insists: “If love is not operative, then community is impossible.” In Thurman, those who are loyal to the beloved community are required to take evil seriously but also to believe that it does not have the last word: “It is not ultimate. Even as evil is active in the lives of men and women, it becomes an ingredient for personal growth. It tests the moral fiber of the person, and by stretching and straining makes the fiber stronger.” Indeed, without trying to explain away or otherwise dismiss the jolting reality, radical evil and suffering “can be instrumental in shaping community” (60-61). In *Luminous Darkness*, Thurman suggests that “the degree to which [one’s] suffering is shared by others marks the potential that such suffering may itself become redemptive” (1965: 55). Thurman brooded long and hard over the problem of evil. Neither he nor King believed that *all* suffering was redemptive. This is a delicate idea. Rufus Burrow puts it this way: “According to King, unearned suffering must be made to be redemptive by sustained and determined nonviolent struggle against it” (2015: 133). In his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, Thurman writes of the Fellowship Church:

There are times when guidance as to techniques and strategy is urgent, when counsel, support, and collective direct action are mandatory. But there can never be a substitute for taking personal responsibility for social change. The word ‘personal’ applies both to the individual and the organization – in this instance, the church. The true genius of the church was revealed by what it symbolized as a beachhead in our society in terms of community, and as an inspiration to the solitary individual to put his weight on the side of a society in which no man need be afraid (1981: 161).

And in his *Search for Common Ground*, in which he argues that “directiveness and creativeness are inherent in life” and that “there is a unity of life across kingdoms or species,” Thurman claimed that “it is not unreasonable, then, to assume that as [one] seeks community, with [one’s] fellows, and with [one’s] world, he [or she] may find that what he [or she] is seeking to do deliberately is but the logic of the meaning of all that has gone into his [or her] own creation” (1971: 41). It is sometimes suggested that freedom and community are the two great philosophical themes in Thurman’s thought: at bottom, freedom and community are of one cloth. “It is not chauvinistic to affirm that our total life as a nation has been a schooling in the meaning of human freedom against a time when the only thing that serves the collective life of man is a dynamic faith in the worth of the individual and the freedom that it inspires” (1954: 14). In *Luminous Darkness*, he put it this way:

One may lose fear also by a sense of being a part of a company of people who share the same concerns and are conscious of participating in the same collective destiny. This is an additional form that the feeling of community inspires. A strange and wonderful courage often comes into a man’s life when he [or she] shares a commitment to something that is more important than whether he [or she] lives or dies. It is the discovery of the dynamic character of life itself. This may not be a conscious act as far as the rationale for it is concerned. It is a discovery of the conditions that generate fresh resources of energy (1965: 58).

When an individual surrenders his or her will to a cause, Thurman thought that “the cause then gives him back his will in order that he might put at the disposal of the cause all that he is, worthily or unworthily” (1951A). In this respect, thought Thurman, the dynamic principles inherent in acts of loyalty resemble the pretzel-logic of love and reconciliation. For Thurman, freedom often meant finding community or integration within oneself. In *The Luminous Darkness*, Thurman writes:

The burden of being black and the burden of being white is so heavy that it is rare in our society to experience oneself as a human being. It may be, I don't know, that to experience oneself as a human being is one with experiencing one's fellows as human beings. It means that the individual must have a sense of kinship to life that transcends and goes beyond the immediate kinship of family or the organic kinship that binds him [or her] ethnically or ‘racially’ or nationally. He has a sense of being an essential part of the structural relationship that exists between him and all other men [and women], and between him, all other men [and women], and the total external environment. As a human being, then, he belongs to life and the whole kingdom of life that includes all that lives and perhaps, also, all that has ever lived. In other words, he sees himself as a part of a continuing, breathing, living existence. To be a human being, then, is to be essentially alive in a living world (1965b: 94).

Rufus Burrow claims that despite recent scholarship on the “black American cultural, family, and religious influences on King” (2015:121), especially but not exclusively by Lewis Baldwin and Clayborne Carson, a coterie to which Burrow himself belongs, “much remains to be done” (ibid.). Burrow suggests that “we do not know nearly enough about the influence of . . . Howard Thurman (122). In Thurman, King encountered both “a man of ideas and theologian of nonviolent resistance” (2015: 14), as Burrow put it, all expressed within the idiom of the African American spiritual experience.

The most succinct formulation of Thurman's thoughts on the beloved community is to be found in his 1966 essay: “Desegregation, Integration, and the Beloved Community.” In that essay, Thurman attempts “to analyze the significance of desegregation against the background of segregation in American society, to interpret integration in the social context created by segregation, [and] to assess the meaning of the ‘beloved community against such a total background” ([1966] 2009: 197). And while Thurman suggests that his theme had been, already in 1966, prior to the assassination of his colleague associated with the phrase, “well-nigh exhaustively mined,” his thoughts on the beloved community in particular seem—fifty years later—poignant and profound.

Thurman thinks it important to “delineate the difference” between segregation in “the closed system of the South,” which he described as “formal, deliberate, open declaration” (201), and the “basic immorality and dishonesty of the systems of power” disclosed within the “de facto segregation in the North” (202). Thurman argued that forms of token integration could inadvertently provide “protection to the pattern of segregation” (204). He contended that genuine integration cannot be achieved “by any kind of mechanical arrangement of persons or rules or regulations” (2009: 204).

It may be facilitated by changes in policies and regulations—it may be provided for in the structure of the organized life of the community or an institution; but integration can never be achieved as an end in itself. It must emerge as an experience after the fact of coming together. The damage to the body politic growing out of ancient patterns of segregation in our society is so profound that the meaning of integration is most often limited to the superficial and mechanical juggling of different kinds of belonging (ibid).

In this way, Thurman approaches the important distinction to be drawn between integration and community. Thurman argued that “unless some other forces are at work which disturb power and controls, then power and social controls use the ballot as a viable instrument in their hands” (201). Eddie Glaude makes a similar point in *Democracy in Black*: “If you believe that white people matter more than black people, then the principles of freedom, liberty, and equality—democracy itself—will be distorted and disfigured” to such a degree that “they may create a framework for equality, but the value gap will always rig the outcomes” (2016: 33-34). Thurman is working with two aspects of integration. By the legal aspect, he means that “there must be no closed systems which operate automatically with reference to any members of society” (204). The legal aspect is located on a grid that progresses “from segregation to desegregation to integration” (205). Legal integration is a necessary yet insufficient condition for “dynamic integration.” It should be guaranteed by our political contract, but “can never be achieved as an end in itself.” Although enactments of legislation are necessary, “they cannot determine or guarantee the *quality* of the personal adjustment within the broad range of open privilege” (ibid.).

In 1965, King suggested that the right to vote would be won less by “winning legal cases” than by “making the case in the court of public opinion.” Michelle Alexander makes the same argument in *The New Jim Crow* when she writes that “the needed reforms have less to do with failed policies than a deeply flawed public consensus, one that is indifferent, at best, to the experiences of poor people of color” (2010: 233). Thurman illustrates this point with reference to his experience with the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, where, “it became increasingly clear that the mere presence of people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds in the membership did not mean that the church itself was integrated.” Dynamic integration and wholeness, he contended, only emerge out of a “natural communal association” sustained by meaningful experiences of togetherness that are “multiplied over an extended time.”

Meaningful experiences of integration between people are more compelling than the fears, the inhibitions, the dogmas, or the prejudices that divide. If such unifying experiences can be multiplied over an extended time, they will be able to restructure the entire fabric of the social context (205).

This “unscrambling process” (Thurman, 1949: 97 ff.), by which legal integration is qualitatively transformed over time into something more dynamic and dependable, gets us a little closer to what Thurman meant by—in 1966—the beloved community.

The Beloved Community is created by the quality of the human relations experienced by the people who live within it. The term itself is an abstraction and becomes concrete in a given time and place in the midst of living human beings. It cannot be brought into being by fiat or by order; it is an achievement of the human spirit as men [and women] seek to fulfill their high destiny as children of God. As a dream of the race, it has moved in and out on the horizon of human strivings like some fleeting ghost. And yet, it remains to haunt and inspire [human beings] in all ages and all conditions. In some sense, it is always vague, and the blueprint for it is often outmoded before it can be translated into living texture ([1966] 2009: 206).

As early as 1963, in *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Thurman speculated that “what is taking place at the level of the physical organism may find its counterpart in the life of the mind and the spirit” (39). The beloved community, for Thurman, and for others who were at that time in the throes

of “the civil rights revolution”, served as both a here-and-now experience of freedom, always within a “social climate,” the residue of which one retains even in solitude, and a “radical moral imperative” that “steadfastly refused to separate the means open to revolution from the ends to be achieved by revolution” (ibid.).

The presence of the Beloved Community is always manifesting itself in the lives of people in the very midst of the social decay which surrounds them. It begins in the human spirit and it moves into the open independence of society (1963: 39).

Thurman claims that each of us is somehow personally responsible, since somehow autonomous, for creating the beloved community—that is, for restoring broken community—within the “society in which he [or she] lives and functions.” The work of nonviolence is animated by a venerable set of spiritual disciplines, including commitment, wisdom, suffering, prayer, and reconciliation. Thurman reminds his readers that “the whole point of the attack on the evils of segregation for the individual, as well as the total society, is that the system renders healthy human relations impossible.”

This essential point can be very easily overlooked, forgotten, or ignored in the white heat of the long, hot summer, the angry violence of a suburban Cicero or the unbelievable Mississippi sadism of Grenada. The issue at stake is only incidentally, though crucially so, the pattern of the civil rights, open occupancy, destruction of ghettos, desegregation of schools, churches, etc. What is being sought is a way of life that is worth living and a faith in one’s self, in others, and the society that can be honestly and intelligently sustained. This is what the Beloved Community is all about ([1996] 2009: 205).

Although he wrote extensively about the search for community after 1966, and while he remained preoccupied throughout his life with what he later called “the tie that binds life at a level so deep that the final privacy of the individual would be reinforced rather than threatened” (1971: xiii), Thurman rarely used the phrase beloved community following the assassination of King. Fluker and Burrow insist that beyond the question of influence of Royce or Thurman, formal or informal, intellectual or experiential, we must also attend to “the normative and empirical dimensions of the problem” within their respective conceptions of community” as well as to “each thinker’s recommendations for overcoming the barriers to community” and “the actualization of community” (1989: xiii-xiv).

### **Josiah Royce (1855-1916)**

“Since the beloved community nomenclature is traceable to Royce,” writes Rufus Burrow, “and was later picked up by King and essentially made the chief regulative principle of his theological social ethics, it makes sense that we should know better than we have previously known, just how King came to know and appropriate the term” (2015: 130). Royce’s influence on Thurman and King is contested and notoriously difficult to measure. The influence of Royce’s philosophical speculations on “the beloved community” and “loyalty to loyalty” can sometimes seem quite remote from, for example, Thurman’s work with the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco or King’s activist-advocacy work with the civil rights movement from Montgomery to Memphis. All the same, there are conspicuous continuities, as there are between Royce and earlier thinkers, not least St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. In Royce, as elsewhere, ‘beloved community’ has served as a distinctively religious concept, though not *exclusively* religious nor *uniquely* Christian.

It is true that Royce's philosophy of loyalty sometimes "shimmers with liberal hopes of human progress and perfectibility," as Charles Marsh puts it. But it would be a mistake to reduce Royce to the view that "most of what one needs to know of God is discovered in ethical religion, slightly adjusted for churchgoers in capitalist economies" (2005: 49). A metaphor such as "a perfectly lived unity of individual men joined in one divine chorus" ([1913] 2005: 196) is not merely a secular throw. For Royce, loyalty to the beloved community constituted a "transfiguring experience" (1913: 18). Perhaps Royce was thinking of Kant, who suggested that significant changes to the "foundation of the maxims" and the substantial "disposition of the human being" could not be "effected through gradual reform but must rather be effected through a revolution in the disposition of the human being" (R 47/68). Royce considered this sort of loyalty a "rebirth" as well as a "source of salvation" ([1908] 2005: 869). Royce suggests – in "The Hope of the Great Community" – that both Christianity and Buddhism agree on this point:

For the detached individual there is no salvation, but between the Buddhist and the Pauline solution 'there exists a significant difference.' Buddha sought the salvation of the detached individual through an act of resignation whereby all desires are finally abandoned. Paul describes what is essentially salvation through loyalty, salvation through the willing service of a community, and the salvation of those whom he characterizes by the words 'They are in Jesus Christ, and walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit.'

Royce appropriates this Christian solution in the following way: "But for Paul the being whom he called Jesus Christ was in essence the spirit of the universal community" (*Papers*, 2: 1154ff.). The U.S. civil rights movement was largely, not exclusively, religious. Although not all action to bolster the poor and excluded is perforce religious, it helps to remember that impulses and movements in aid of the disadvantaged often have been and are grounded in deeply religious sentiments.

Royce's religious construction of 'beloved community' is consistent with King's, but diverges from it in striking ways. Indeed, in some respects, their positions appear almost diametrically opposed. In Royce, the 'beloved community' trumps the individual. In King, the individual, among others, resists existing community and seeks to overcome it. Royce sees the community as embodying a "higher and therefore super-human form of love powerful enough to transform the individual and at the same time do away with the fatal outcome of natural social cultivation which is based on nothing higher than human talents and potentials" (1913: 76). Though societies must be changed to change individuals, what consistently mattered more, for King, and consistent with his ethics of leadership and personalism, was the need "to change the souls of individuals so that their societies may be changed" (*Papers*, 7: 31 [1948] 2007).

Royce's emphasis was upon the capacity of a pre-existent love within an already united community to transform the individual. This transfiguring relationship, for Royce, this "mystery of loving membership in a community whose meaning seems divine" (1913: 140), as he expressed it in *The Problem of Christianity*, is the "specific condition" of that particular genuineness or authenticity that constitutes "the graced or beloved community." Royce thought that religious communities allow us "to carry on, even after serious defeat and loss, and to believe that our experience of finitude will not be the last word" (Nagl 2012: 110). King's emphasis by contrast was upon a deeper inner strength, by singular persons within blighted communities, whose powerful enemies were marked by hate, not love, and who must be resisted, in order to create societies in which love might flourish where little was actually to be found.

So for Royce, *mas o meno*, the Divinity is already (perhaps as in Jane Austen) abroad, defending an order already in place. Ludwig Nagl writes that Royce, in *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, “begins to elucidate his community-oriented ethics in explicitly religious terms.” This community is some species of absolute whose borders are precise yet creep toward infinity. The implication is that no community is merely self-enclosed. Because this is an ethical community, members confere upon it a depthless loyalty. This allegiance is to an ethic, by which members are touched, in which they are bathed, and is not quite a loyalty to each member in his or her idiosyncratic corporeal form. ‘Beloved community’, for Royce, is not an empirically oriented scientific congress. Rather, it incorporates and reflects a will to embrace more than what is, but more especially what has been and what is to come. This may be expressed as ‘loyalty to loyalty.’ But it may simply signal a thirst for endurance and permanence.

Royce views ‘beloved community’ as religious, hence eternal and infinite, a place of rest and morally blest. Such communities allow us, he argues in *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, “even after serious defeat and loss, to carry on, and to believe that our experience of finiteness . . . will not be the last word” (1908: 997). The invisible but at the same time pluralistically and imperfectly instantiated community, which Royce calls the “beloved community,” has a special quality and unique type of infinity or conception of the absolute. Religious communities are constituted at their core, suggests Nagl’s reading of Royce, “by an internal loving interrelation, and by a trustful relationship – not towards an immanent infinity (cognitive truth, e.g., or institutional reform) but towards a saving absolute.” This relationship, namely, “the mystery of loving membership in a community whose meaning seems divine is the specific condition of that particular ‘genuineness’ which constitutes the ‘graced or beloved community’” (1913: 140).

The philosophical or religious trope of beloved community, variably envisioned, is a helpful lens through which – as Thurman put it – “to perceive a harmony that transcends all diversities and in which diversity finds its richness and significance.” Royce, Thurman, and King were all committed to building a community built on love. Each was convinced that “their help was needed.” The sort of help required, as they perceived it, was the push essential to nudging the “provincialism” of communities onto the upward path of increasingly nonexclusionistic loyalties. In this sense, Royce’s philosophy of loyalty constitutes a socioethical *summum bonum*:

Reverberating all through you, stirring you to your depths, loyalty first unifies your plan of life, and thereby gives you what nothing else can give – viz., your Self as a life lived in accordance with a plan, your conscience as your plan interpreted for you through your ideal, your cause as your personal purpose in living ([1908] 2005: 1008).

There is a distinct ethical aspect to Royce’s philosophy of community and loyalty. For him a cause is good where “it is an aid and furtherance of loyalty in my fellows.” Otherwise, when the cause is evil, if destructive of loyalty in the world, loyalty can be “predatory.” But there is also a metaphysical if not ultimately theological or religious dimension, including a theory of personal identity, to his thought during the final ten years of his life. Acts of loyalty and devotion, which express self-renunciation, constitute something along the lines of a conversion experience. Royce suggests the individual is transmuted into a person only when renouncing selfishness. Loyalty consists in a “willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause,” as Royce expresses it in the opening lecture of his *Philosophy of Loyalty*. Royce affirms that “commitment requires self-sacrifice” since “no cause is loyal which seeks to gain a purely personal advantage”

(1908: 299). As John Clendenning puts it, “[T]he principle that defines the ego also shows the emptiness of egoism.” Clendenning describes the role of love or “social motive” in what might be called the last phase of Royce’s life and thought: “Love had always been central to his philosophy: the principle of harmony, the world of appreciation, the theory of individuation, the philosophy of loyalty are all variations on the same theme – that love gives meaning to life” (322). The socioethical ideal of the beloved community served for Royce as “the principle of all principles” ([1913] 2001: 200) and, as Burrow puts it, “the keystone of Martin Luther King’s theological ethics” (2015: 134). Between Royce’s original formulation of the principle and King’s beautiful appropriation of the term were Rauschenbusch and Brightman, but also Howard Thurman.

## Conclusion

For King and Thurman and Royce, though each expressed it in his own way, the notion of the beloved community signaled a loyal commitment to radical because unconditional love, social justice, and an acknowledgement of the inviolable dignity of persons. Royce as well as Thurman and King were responding to the appeal of their own conscience, which Thurman called “the sound of the genuine.” Thurman wrote that he felt “the needs of my people.” King acted he said “because my people need me.” Royce declared he rallied “because my help is needed.” Each of these philosophers was willing to make sacrifices in order to serve the needs of “those with their backs against the wall” (Thurman, 1949). King (1968) spoke of being “enmeshed in an intricate fabric of co-dependence.” The edges of the beloved community grow, creatively, by means of discovering our unknown brothers and sisters. Near the conclusion of *Search for Common Ground*, Thurman wrote:

One day there will stand up in their midst one who will tell of a new sickness among the children who in their delirium cry for their brothers who they have never known and from whom they have been cut off behind the self-imposed barriers of their fathers. An alarm will spread throughout the community that it is being felt and slowly realized that community cannot feed for long on itself; it can only flourish where always the boundaries are giving way to the coming of others from beyond them—unknown and undiscovered brothers. Then the wisest among them will say: What we have sought we have found, our own sense of identity. We have established a center out of which at last we can function and relate to other men. We have committed to heart and to nervous system a feeling of belonging and our spirits are no longer isolated and afraid (1971: 104).

Following Thurman: “If one is moved from within one’s own spirit to do the deed of ministering to the need of another, and if the need of another is the point at which the spirit is most highly sensitized to communication, then it follows that the good deed is a meeting place of one life with another” ([1973] 1981: 38). Such is the dynamic process by which genuine community emerges.

As we can see from the three cases considered here, the notion of community, not least where qualified as ‘beloved,’ and conceived in religious terms, is an immensely rich one. But we live in a highly individuated age, where it becomes accordingly more difficult to establish how it can be that any one being may in any way bind with another. We distinguish between the religious and the secular, a distinction not altogether reliable. Michael Oakeshott contended that every pluralism is a monism. The psychiatrist and the priest seek to make us whole, to redeem us from

our schizoid tendencies. The lawyer and the philosopher seek to unearth those principles that enable us to join together in a common peace. Martin Hollis argued that the secular wheels of government were spun by the energy of trust. The church fathers, like St. Augustine, held that community was sustained by faith. It is for the reader to judge how great a gap there may be between the two.

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Martin Luther King. 4 years ago. NewChurch LIVE Plus. From the service originally presented on January 15th, 2017. Upload, livestream, and create your own videos, all in HD. Join Vimeo. Log in. Martin Luther King's primary emphasis was upon "beloved community," a phrase he borrowed from Royce, but an idea that he shared with St. Augustine. Theories of the state tend to focus ... Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Howard Thurman, and Josiah Royce. Kipton Jensen & Preston King. Authors. Martin Luther King, Jr., Professor of Ethical Leadership and Editor and Director, The Howard Thurman Papers Project, BU School of Theology. During his last year, King asked the difficult question, "Where do we go from here?" as a signal to African Americans and other marginalized groups that their quests for full citizenship would need to extend beyond the restricted boundaries of US geopolitical and capitalist interests in what he called a "World House." The enduring legacy of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., is one of radical love for all humanity. Dr. King dedicated his life to combating racial injustice and poverty, and in the last year of his life, he took a risky stance against US involvement in the Vietnam War on moral grounds. King very likely learned the catchphrase "beloved community" from the American philosopher Josiah Royce, who some fifty years before King wrote, "the principle of principles in all Christian morals remains this: since you cannot find the universal and beloved community, create it . . . take steps towards the organization of that coming community." It is not clear by whom Royce's beloved community would be beloved, although probably not by the unwitting Myrmidons who would find their souls squashed together in this paradise of preachers, puppets and pickpockets. The twentieth century taught us that there is only one way to create this sort of "beloved community," and that is by bullying or burying anyone who does not feel or feign the love. Martin Luther King Jr. (born Michael King Jr.; January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968) was an African American, Baptist minister, and activist who became the most visible spokesperson and leader in the American civil rights movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968. King advanced civil rights through nonviolence and civil disobedience, inspired by his Christian beliefs and the nonviolent activism of Mahatma Gandhi. He was the son of early civil rights activist Martin Luther King Sr.

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Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Howard Thurman, and Josiah Royce. Kipton Jensen & Preston King. Authors. Thurman's Influence on Martin Luther King, Jr, Inner Authority and Beloved Community audio with Lerita Coleman Brown (17 minutes) Reflection Questions: Silent time for reflection, pondering questions and journaling. Technical requirements: The retreat website can be accessed on any computer or tablet.  
I know that Howard Thurman inspires me, so this seemed to present a wonderful opportunity to learn more and sit in the Presence of God, too. I have been a part of three of Shalem's online courses. All of them have been well-led and offered with careful instructions that did not make heavy demands on my minimal computer knowledge. On April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. An hour later, he was declared dead. For nearly 50 years, the federal government has maintained that James Earl Ray was the gunman who assassinated King that day. But within Martin Luther King's family, there remains a persistent belief that Ray is innocent, and was set up to take the fall. FBI investigators at the time traced the shot to a rooming house across the street, and witnesses directed them to a large bundle dropped on the sidewalk after the shooting. It contained a pair of binoculars, a newspaper with a story about King staying at the Lorraine Motel, and a .30-06 Remington Gamemaster that had fired one shot.