

Why black American theologians went to India

By [Sarah Azaransky](#)

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The Ebola outbreak is centered in three West African countries where [almost 4,500 people have died](#); 17 people have been treated for the disease [in Europe and North America](#), most of whom are health and aid workers who contracted the disease in West Africa. Americans are vigorously debating whether to place a travel ban on anyone trying to enter the nation from affected regions. But as this disease outbreak underscores our globalized, interconnected reality, we need to share resources and ideas to promote healing and public health, at home and abroad. Advocates of interreligious engagement—through their willingness to move across dangerous boundaries—show us how exchange does not necessarily beget vulnerability; it can bolster our humanity.

To begin a [series of lectures in 1947 at the University of Calcutta](#), black American theologian William Stuart Nelson thanked his audience for coming “in spite of great inconvenience and some danger.” Calcutta was a city on edge. A year earlier Hindus and Muslims had massacred each other, killing thousands. Violence still throbbed at a lower ebb. Days before independence—and partition—Nelson spoke about how people could share common cause despite ideological differences. Essential to this possibility, he argued, was “a belief in the plurality of values, the many-sidedness of the good.”

Interreligious learning is crucial for the peaceful resolution of global differences, Nelson told his Calcutta audience. Love is integral to Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity. This love is not sentimentalism, rather it is, in each case, a call to action on behalf of fellow human beings. Though appealing to what he called a “universal truth” reflected through these traditions, Nelson did not minimize religious differences. In fact he worried that interreligious learning had been limited by “our failure to recognize values in the diversities in these religions.” It is possible, he insisted “that the love life of religion is best developed by one set of practices among one people and another set among another.”

Nelson gave his Calcutta lectures at the end of a ten-month sabbatical in India. Visits with Gandhi were the highlight of his time in India. They met in Calcutta, where Gandhi had stationed himself to prevent further violence. Gandhi despaired that nonviolence had failed; he told Nelson that “[the attitude of violence](#) which we had secretly harbored, in spite of the restraint imposed by the Indian National Congress, now recoiled upon us and made us fly at each other’s throats when the question of the distribution of power came up.” What Gandhi once identified as nonviolence he worried had actually been passive resistance, which he dismissed as a weapon of the weak.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the strife Nelson witnessed in India and Gandhi’s increasing doubts about nonviolence, Nelson became all the more convinced black Americans should study Gandhi’s movement and Indian religions. He was not alone in this conviction.

Nelson’s visits with Gandhi came a decade after his friends Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays had met the Mahatma. The three black Christian theologians shared an abiding interest in Gandhi’s leadership of a nonviolent, anticolonial movement, and they practiced what constructive comparative theologian John Thatamanil has called “[interreligious receptivity](#).” That is, they learned about Indian religions and, as a result, they began to understand their own tradition in a new way. The best-known example is Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the book he wrote in the wake of his Indian travels; Gandhian themes of fearlessness and religion’s role in social transformation run through the text as a way to make sense of Jesus’s significance for black Americans living under Jim Crow.

For Nelson in the late 1940s, interreligious learning was critical for Christians to develop morally robust responses to America’s new position globally and to its continued subjugation of its own people. Such learning remains urgent for American Christians who hope to articulate dynamic theological responses to injustices that occur at home and abroad. In the face of a public health challenge, interreligious learning reminds us of our shared humanity. By learning about other religious traditions, Nelson maintained, Christians can reflect anew on the good life and we may better respond to our vocation to love. In other words, interreligious learning may help us to live as Christians.

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