The panopticon at Kilmainham Gaol is one of the most famous examples of a panopticon prison in the world. It was built in the early 19th century and was used to house prisoners during the Irish War of Independence. The panopticon is now a museum and is open to the public for tours. (Wikimedia Commons/Julian Dunn)

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In the late 18th century, the British philosopher [Jeremy Bentham](#), who is largely recognized as the founder of the modern utilitarianism school of philosophical thought, sketched out the design for a new kind of prison. He called it the "panopticon," drawing on the Greek root word panoptes meaning "all seeing." It was an architectural proposal that sought to solve issues related to prisoner unrest, rebellion and undiscipline in a context where there were significantly fewer guards than there were prisoners.

The design is, in many ways, quite simple: a circular building that housed individual cells within the perimeter would surround a guard tower or observation room that had a direct line of sight into each of the prison's cells. While the guard station would have visual access to each prisoner at any time, there would be some kind of concealment mechanism — something like a two-way mirror — that prevented the prisoners from seeing if and when a guard was actually observing them. Bentham described the effect as "a sort of invisible omnipresence" for those in power over those incarcerated.

One of the main ideas was that this "invisible omnipresence" would affect the psychology of the prisoners over time such that they would begin to act as if they were always under surveillance and, Bentham theorized, they would behave accordingly. Another way to think about this is that it would create and persistently maintain a threat of observation, reaction and punishment, which would instill a disciplinary fear in those under the power of those in authority.

This dynamic of how power and fear function in the panopticon is not limited simply to formal prisons or similar institutions. The psychological phenomenon arising from such surveillance techniques can be seen playing out in unjust societies, especially when minoritized populations are targeted, segregated or otherwise threatened.

I was reminded of the concept of the panopticon recently while reading some of the late [Howard Thurman](#)'s writings as part of my [ongoing exploration](#) of resources for [spiritual resistance](#). In his 1949 classic *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman writes: "Always back of the threat is the rumor or the fact that somewhere, under some

similar circumstances violence was used. That is all that is necessary. The threat becomes the effective instrument."

Thurman notes that the oppressed are conditioned, or what the philosopher Michel Foucault would call "disciplined," to be consistently afraid of deleterious consequences, even violence. This persistent and omnipresent fear creeps into the bones, haunts the imagination and curbs the ambitions and will of those who are subjected to such panoptic threats. Thurman was writing from his perspective as a Black man in America and theologian who saw in the insidious practices of anti-Black racism a tenacious defense of white supremacy that had real consequences for society and the church. He writes:

> There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count and that no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person. The threat of violence is ever present, and there is no way to determine precisely when it may come crashing down upon you. In modern power politics this is called a war of the nerves. The underprivileged in any society are the victims of a perpetual war of nerves. The logic of the state of affairs is physical violence, but it need not fulfill itself in order to work its perfect havoc in the souls of the poor.

Theologian Howard Thurman is depicted in stained glass at Howard University in Washington, D.C. (Wikimedia Commons/Fourandsixty)

Sadly, Thurman's insights continue to be relevant today, although we might also add other categories of people and communities to the list of the disinherited alongside the Black community in the United States: members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially trans folks; immigrants and refugees; and now even federal employees and other civil servants. These and other populations are being targeted by the current presidential administration through an onslaught of executive actions, dehumanizing rhetoric and other threats.

Among the apparent aims of this barrage of action is the instillation of fear and the resultant panoptic effect on these populations. In time, those in power do not need to issue specific threats or deploy explicit coercive techniques, because the oppressed will self-censor and preemptively behave in a manner they believe is desired by the powerful. This is to let fear prevail over justice and moral fortitude.

We are seeing this increase in fear in many sectors today from leadership in higher education and religious congregations to major corporations and media outlets. There is a chilling effect that haunts many institutions and organizations across all corners of our society today, which has led to preemptive policy and title changes, website scrubbing, program cancelation and the laying off of personnel.

So, what can be done?

Women sing during the Diocese of Brooklyn's annual Black History Month Mass of thanksgiving at St. Therese of Lisieux Church in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn, N.Y., Feb. 16, 2025. The liturgy is sponsored by the diocese's Vicariate Office of Black Catholic Concerns. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Drawing on the biblical witness of Jesus Christ in the gospels, Thurman emphasizes the importance of facing fear directly and developing an authentically Christian spirituality. The proposal is simple, but the cost may be great. It starts, Thurman says, with embracing one's identity as a beloved child of God. This is the beginning of rightly ordering one's perspective and relationship to other people, especially those deploying power in harmful ways.

Thurman explains that if a person reorients themselves to reflect the gospel call to trust God and embrace justice and peace, then one "recognizes at once that to fear a man, whatever may be that man's power over him, is a basic denial of the integrity of his very life. It lifts that mere man to a place of pre-eminence that belongs to God and to God alone."

In other words, to give these bad faith actors this much power is to commit a form of spiritual idolatry by giving to them what ought to be reserved for God alone. As true as this is, it does not mean it is easy or without cost. Thurman continues:

> To the child of God, a scale of values becomes available by which men are measured and their true significance is determined. Even the threat of violence, with the possibility of death that it carries is recognized for what it is — merely the threat of violence with a death potential. Such a man recognizes that death cannot possibly be the worst thing in the world. There are some things that are worse than death. To deny one's integrity of personality in the presence of the human challenge is one of those things.

Indeed, there are many people who are tempted to surrender their integrity out of fear for what the consequences might be for standing up, speaking out and doing what is right and just.

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Thurman does not take lightly the threat of violence and the risk of death. As a Black man in the 1940s, whose grandmother was born enslaved, he knew firsthand the real consequences of living out what he was preaching.

But he also knew the spiritual dangers of seeking the seeming paths of least resistance, of pursuing personal comfort and individual security over living righteously, courageously and in a manner reflecting Jesus's teachings within community.

Thurman spoke with the clarity and conviction of a Christian who himself was in a precarious social location but remained committed to his spiritual convictions. His wisdom ought to be all the more impactful for those of us whose social locations are positioned in more privileged contexts and who exercise power in leadership positions in the church, academy or society. Instead of caving to the temptations of

the panopticon of self-censorship and preemptive actions, we must strive to remember who we are, who God is, and act accordingly as disciples of Christ and not captives of fear.

As those in power who seek only their own interest and gain continue seeking to instill panoptical fear so that the fearful preemptively do their bidding, those Christians who are tempted to succumb to this dynamic must remember who we are and in whom we place our ultimate trust.