

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin

James Baldwin's furious essays always reveal a sense of community, contemporary insights on race, and the pervading matter (or question) of fraternal love. At the center of Baldwin's essays are Christian themes and intransigent messages of biblical import couched in religious language, baroque prose and vivid imagery. Racial identity and Christianity are always prevalent in Baldwin's essay, with the author's relentless examination of human compassion, racial justice, and moral crisis. Baldwin's writing juxtapositions ministerial styles of the black Baptist church and Christian faith and hope as a moral compass to gauge humanity's possibility for redemption so that the world may be healed and saved from imminent self-destruction. These are major themes and motifs in Baldwin's work, our own morality and decency and propensity to love above all else. Although Baldwin eventually left the church¹, the

¹ Baldwin, in *TFNT*, points to several "dates" which witnessed the "slow crumbling of my faith, the pulverization of my fortress," beginning with Dostoevski (51). Later, while he lay at the church's alter, tarrying and prayerfully pleading for the Holy Ghost to speak to him, enter his body and save him from the evils of sin, Baldwin continued to wrestle with the absurdity of religion, race, and Godly love:

But God - and I felt this even then, so long, on that tremendous floor, unwillingly - is white. And if His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far? Why? In spite of all I said thereafter, I found no answer on the floor - not that answer, anyway - and I was on that floor all night (46).

By the near-end of his ministerial duties, young Baldwin realized the church is not above graft and sin and worldly ways ("They were waiting for me to come to my senses and realize that I was in a very lucrative business"), and he now realizes that he must confront the reality of his religious experience, that his faith has been disappointedly shattered, and he is therefore unable to continue teaching to the congregation lessons on faith, holiness, righteous and divinity:

church never left him. Christian messages of morality and redemption have remained a recurring motif in most of Baldwin's work.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin is also despondent over the possibility of Christian redemption, and devotes a considerable amount of time and space deconstructing the tenets of Christianity to grapple with its contradictions and untruths. For Baldwin, deconstruction must begin with a confessional expose of the inherent contradictions of Christianity, but first, an explanation for how it all began:

I underwent, during the summer that I became fourteen, a prolonged religious crisis. I use the word "religious" in the common, and arbitrary, sense, meaning that I then discovered God, His saints and angels, and His blazing Hell. And since I had been

I was even lonelier and more vulnerable than I had been before. And the blood of Lamb had not cleansed me in any way whatever. I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born. Therefore, when I faced a congregation, it began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike. When I watched all the children, their copper, brown and beige faced staring up at me as I taught Sunday school, I felt that I was committing a crime in talking about the gentle Jesus, in telling them to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life (56-57).

Finally, Baldwin has come full circle with what he now understands to be a moral struggle, one which has pitted us against Him:

It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must believe that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibition, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him (67).

born in a Christian nation, I accepted this Deity as the only one. I supposed him to exist only within the walls of a church - in fact, of our church - and I also supposed that God and safety were synonymous (27).

The religious meditations in the essay provides us with a sense of how Baldwin came to view the world (in moral and ethical terms), his vision of his community and a moral society, and how and where he fit into this context (through personal experiences), how he deals with his identity. It also interrogates Christianity's myriad contradictions and its inability to truly deliver man from his primal evil instincts. Church and its profound influences are indelibly stamped on the author's personal experiences, and Baldwin's essay reads like a confessional, as though he is sitting in the confession booth explaining to us the contradictions of Christianity and humanity as well in the sense of what we've accepted as truth. Thus the point for Baldwin is to reanalyze the immorality and inhumanity of his society, and the things he believed to be true and honest, through the very devices which has ironically formed it's moral and spiritual foundation. For Baldwin, it is a matter of man's inherent carnal desires (the seven sins) versus God's contestations to reject sin. In the following passage, Baldwin wrestles with the matter of his identity and the unavoidable schism between black folk and a white god. In the face of a

startling revelation (which is inextricable to the matter and search for his own identity - both racial and personal), the author finds the necessary path towards freedom and redemption:

I was forced, reluctantly, to realize that the Bible itself had been written by men, and translated by men out of languages I could not read, and I was already, without quite admitting it to myself, terribly involved with the effort of putting words on paper: These men had all been operating under divine inspiration. Had they? All of them? And I also knew by now, alas, far more about divine inspiration than I dare admit, for I knew how I worked myself up into my own visions..... I did not understand the dreams I had at night, but I knew that they were not holy.....I spent most of my time in a state of repentance for things I had vividly desired to do but had not done. The fact that I was dealing with Jews brought the whole question of color, which I had been desperately avoiding, into the terrible center of my mind. I realized that the Bible had been written by white men. I knew that, according to many Christians, I was the a descendant of Ham, who had been cursed, and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave (52-53).

Sondra A. O'Neale's critical essay sheds new perspectives on how to consider the author's preoccupation with Christian motifs. In *"Fathers, Gods, and Religion: Perceptions of Christianity and Ethnic Faith in James Baldwin,"* O'Neale writes:

Baldwin's works illustrate the schizophrenia of the black American experience with Christianity. Much of the symbolism, language, archetypal rhythm, and thematic call for justice in his essays are so steeped in Christian ethics that his readers may become deafened to the tragicomic Christian pathos that is agonizing at the heart of the Baldwin message (127).

Baldwin realizes that black people are only as doomed as they are willing to continue to believe in false hopes and promises that God will deliver them. For Baldwin, this is an impossible dream because whites are beyond redemption, and blacks are forever entangled in a psychological state of historical white psychic bombardment of racial inferiority. In the next passage, Baldwin's polemical language is in the tradition of black Christian protest:

Negroes in this country - and Negroes do not, strictly or legally speaking, exist in any other - are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world. This world is white and they are black. White people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks (intrinsically, that is: God decreed it so), and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt (39-40).

In the end, the prose style of *TFNT* is sermonic and provocative, full of the rich tradition of black church preacher protestations Baldwin witnessed while growing up the son of a

preacher. With its pervading examination of spiritual crises, religious irony and Christian contradictions, *TFNT* demonstrates an eloquent command of language and has influenced me immensely. More important, the essay provided me a lesson on Baldwin's economical use of words and language. On the one hand, he is able to create efficient, musical sentences and make good use of rhythm and beat. On the other hand, his sentence constructions are the most brave and courageous acts of literary creativity.