

The Negative Political Theology of James Baldwin

Vincent Lloyd

Religious language, ideas, and images pervade the essays, plays, stories, and novels of James Baldwin. A product of Black Pentecostalism and a teenage preaching prodigy, Baldwin describes his writing style as influenced by the King James Bible and the storefront church (see Hardy). Verses from the Bible and snippets of gospel music pervade Baldwin's texts. Yet religion also appears in Baldwin's work as something he has overcome, a distasteful encounter with authoritarianism that he passed through to reach his present secular democratic enlightenment. If this is the case, the religious language that appears in Baldwin's texts could be read as rhetorical flourish, leveraging the persuasive power of a Christian idiom without any commitment to Christian beliefs.

Some have suggested that Baldwin occupies a religious office, that of the prophet. Standing at the margins of a community, the prophet makes explicit that community's values, and the prophet condemns the community for its present deviations from those values (Walzer). Now that the world has secularized, the prophet no longer must invoke God's name in her condemnations. Furthermore, instead of holding out the promise of other-worldly rewards, the secularized prophet would hold out the promise of this-worldly happiness once we accept human finitude. On this reading, Baldwin is the quintessential democratic prophet, explicating democratic values and enumerating the ways nations ostensibly committed to democracy fall short – where an acceptance of human finitude is a core commitment of democratic politics (Shulman).

Neither a focus on Baldwin's religious language nor on Baldwin's prophetic posturing considers the possibility that a specifically Christian set of ideas might frame Baldwin's political vision. Scholarship on political theology has shown the fruitfulness of examining subtle connections between theological and political ideas, of examining how they can mirror each other and how they can shift together. Recovering these connections can help us understand a writer's political vision more clearly. It can reveal weaknesses in that political vision by illuminating incoherence or by showing how the theological premises on which a political argument once implicitly relied no longer have traction.

I will argue that James Baldwin transformed, rather than rejected, his father's Christianity. The components of that Christianity – ideas about innocence, salvation, sin, truth, and much else – are reworked by Baldwin, and in their new form they are inextricably linked with Baldwin's political vision. Race is essential to this theological transformation, for Baldwin charges most Christians with misunderstanding race and so misunderstanding their religion; the condition of blackness produces a natural (although often suppressed) attunement to truth. As he writes, "Black is a tremendous spiritual condition" (E471). In Baldwin's transformed theology, whiteness represents idolatry, represents worldly interests elevating themselves to the place of the transcendent, defining the true, the good, and the beautiful. The theology that Baldwin offers in its place is negative, part of the long tradition of Christian negative theology for which the only true thing that can be said about God is what God is not: the work of theology is the critique of idolatry. Baldwin does not offer a black theology to oppose white theology; he offers a thoroughgoing critique of the religion of whiteness, and he posits a name for what remains when that critique is successful: love.

Fathers and Gods

Baldwin's negative political theology begins with his father who serves as the paradigmatic symbol of authority, and of idolatry. Fathers play central roles in Baldwin's fiction and essays, from his first books (a working title for his first novel was *In My Father's House*; his first essay collection is *Notes of a Native Son*) to his last. Throughout, fathers are identified with gods – false gods. They seem to have absolute power, but in fact that power is compromised and precarious. Fatherhood itself is unsettled, with apparent fathers revealed to not be fathers at all, creating a world of bastards (unlike Wright's, Baldwin's "native son" carries irony). Baldwin describes himself as a "bastard of the West" (E7), and he names black Americans "nameless and unnamable bastards" living in "the great Western house" (E468). Yet the need for a father persists; Baldwin is haunted by the question – posed by his first minister and by Elijah Muhammad, as well as by the even more idolatrous gods of the street – "whose little boy are you?" To which he responds, in retrospect, "I unquestionably wanted to be somebody's little boy" (E303). We long for a father, or for a god; for an authority in absolute control. Acknowledging this longing and rejecting any object that would sate it is at the center of Baldwin's political theological vision.

The eponymous essay of *Notes of a Native Son* is the story of two days in which Baldwin's father, a preacher, dies, Baldwin's sister is born, Baldwin himself comes of age (it is his nineteenth birthday), and the world descends into chaos, into race riots. It is the story of the collapse of absolute authority and its aftermath, personally and politically. Chaos and violence could result, or new life could result. With proper reflection – and, ultimately, with the activity of writing itself – we are able to opt for the latter. We are able to critically appropriate the legacy of

the father, of the god, accepting how the legacy shapes us but also acknowledging its pathologies.

Baldwin introduces his father, the preacher, as almost mythical, as god-like. No one knew his age. He was handsome and proud and “very black.” He looked “like pictures I had seen of African tribal chieftains: he really should have been naked, with war-paint on and barbaric mementos, standing among spears” (E64). His power, it would seem, came from time immemorial, and it was sanctioned by the heavens; indeed, its provenance was the heavens. He “lived, like a prophet, in such unimaginably close communion with the Lord that his long silences which were punctuated by moans and hallelujahs and snatches of old songs” (E66).

The seemingly absolute power of this god-father, of this father-sovereign, was, Baldwin recalls, undermined as soon as he encountered the white world. In the essay, Baldwin recalls how one of his white teachers took an interest in him and went to his home to ask permission from the young Baldwin’s parents to take him to a play. “It was clear, during the brief interview in our living room, that my father was agreeing very much against his will and that he would have refused permission if he had dared. The fact that he did not dare caused me to despise him” (E68). The will of the father was not absolute, and the young Baldwin now knew it. It was always already undermined by another will, the will of the white world which surrounded them, putting fatherhood under erasure for black Americans. If the father’s role is traditionally to teach the child social norms, to impose rules so that the child can learn the rules of a society, the black father necessarily fails at this task. As Baldwin puts in in a later essay, the black child “must be ‘good’ not only in order to please his parents and not only to avoid being punished by them; behind their authority stands another, nameless and impersonal, infinitely harder to please, and bottomlessly cruel” (E302). Here we start seeing how blackness is a “tremendous spiritual

condition,” for Baldwin wants to claim that this precariousness of authority – divine, paternal, or political – is a part of the human condition writ large, black Americans just have the opportunity, as it were, to encounter it much earlier, and more frequently, than whites.

The result of trying to be a father in a land that makes fatherhood impossible is madness; Baldwin’s father went mad, and it eventually killed him. The world also went mad: race riots left New York in disarray. “As we drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent, and hatred were all around us” (E63). And so, too, did the young James Baldwin, but only for a moment. When confronted, at the “American Diner,” with a waitress who refused him service because of his race, Baldwin felt hatred become madness in him, hatred which he imagines his father also felt, hatred that animated his father’s life. But then, Baldwin grew up. Unlike his father, he was able to acknowledge his own hatred and to see how it could detrimentally affect his life. He saw how his father’s Christianity was motivated by this hatred, how its apocalypticism and worldly denial were a product of American race relations – and how they would not remedy racial injustice.

At the end of “Notes of a Native Son,” as Baldwin recalls his father’s funeral, recalls the officiant speaking Christian words that so falsely described the man he knew, he reflects on a Biblical passage his father would preach “But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Baldwin decides to embrace this sentiment, and in doing so he affirmed his faithfulness to both a divine and a human father. Instead of rejecting any figure of fatherhood, Baldwin would – impossibly – affirm it, affirm a figure of authority that could never come into existence in the world as it is. In doing so, Baldwin professed a faith which entailed not blind belief but the difficult work of identifying and disavowing idolatry. For Baldwin, faith in a god-father ought to mean “acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are”: which leads,

Baldwin continues, to rejecting every distortion of life, indeed, fighting every such injustice (E84). The god-father is not rejected, he just comes to motivate criticism rather than adherence, to motivate the struggle against purported god-fathers, encapsulated by the regime of white supremacy – the “Great White Father” (E410).

Baldwin’s semi-autobiographical first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is also a story of impossible fatherhood. It begins with an alienated son, destined to follow his father into the pulpit, turning fourteen and seeing himself as a sinner. His mother affirms the omniscience of his father: “Your father knows best. You listen to your father, I guarantee you you won’t end up in no jail.” Then, in the next words out of her mouth, it is God who provides assurances: “there ain’t no safety except you walk humble before the Lord” (N23). One of the sons ponders, “I know the Lord ain’t as hard as Daddy.” The novel culminates in the protagonist’s conversion, a conversion that effectively replaces the human father with a less stringent divine father. At the very end of the novel, the protagonist and his father have a quiet confrontation. “He turned to face his father – he found himself smiling, but his father did not smile” (N215). The father recognized his authority undercut by another; indeed it was undercut twice. After the conversion, on the way home, the father is reminded by his sister that he is not actually a biological father at all, but rather a step-father. Just as in *Notes of a Native Son*, seemingly absolute authority is exposed as less than absolute. In this case, the relationship between authority and biology is also destabilized (to be a father is not necessarily to be genetically related to a son; Baldwin’s own “father” was a step-father, though this is not mentioned in *Notes*). Yet at the same time that the narrator of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is refusing his father’s authority, he necessarily remains within its orbit: his father, after all, is a preacher, and the protagonist, because of his apparent paternity, was destined to follow his father into the church.

Baldwin's 1974 novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, published some twenty years after his first novel, continues to press the question of the impossibility of black fatherhood in America – that is to say, the question of the impossibility of black authority. The novel opens with a woman on her way to tell her unjustly imprisoned lover, Fonny, that she is pregnant. It ends with the birth of this baby coinciding with the suicide of Fonny's father. The book's epigraph, "Mary, Mary, / What you going to name / That pretty little baby?", from a hymn, presses the religious significance of fatherhood. The female protagonist, whose lover was her childhood friend and who persists in a childish innocence about the world, is in a sense mysteriously inseminated (her lover, after all, is in prison, though he was not when she conceived). Where Jesus's paternity was other-worldly, the father of this new, unnamed baby is also taken away by the world – to "the Tombs," the Manhattan Detention Center. The protagonist remarks to the reader that "when I first had to go and see him in the Tombs, and walked up those steps and into those halls, it was just like walking into church" (B26). Fonny, imprisoned, can only be an absent father to his Mary-like lover; Fonny's father, in the ghetto, a prison without bars, can never do enough for his son. Despite working long hours and stealing from his employer, there are always more lawyer's fees and a high bail. "I don't know if I was ever any kind of father to him – any kind of *real* father – and now he's in jail and it ain't his fault and I don't even know how I'm going to get him out. I'm sure one hell of a man" (B126). Enraged by the impossibility of his position, the father ultimately kills himself. Baldwin dramatizes this crisis of authority by depicting Fonny's father's divine aspirations. Fonny's mother is an assertively pious woman; Fonny overhears his parents making love: "And she'd say, Oh, Frank, let me bring you to the Lord. And he'd say, Shit, woman, I'm going to bring the Lord to *you*. *I'm* the Lord" (B16).

The fathers depicted in Baldwin's works are authoritarian and aspire to omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Those aspirations are rejected, but the fathers are not. Fatherhood is inescapable, and the attempt to escape brings doom. Rather, Baldwin calls on us to acknowledge the impossibility of their position, and we must take that paradox of authority-under-erasure as an invitation to purge ourselves of the false authorities that grip us. The same is true – and not merely by analogy – for Baldwin's God. Discussions of political theology, following Carl Schmitt, often focus on the relationship between political sovereign and God's sovereignty, accepting the need for some concept of sovereignty as a given. Perhaps we can read Baldwin as questioning the sovereignty of God and father – and so, the purported sovereignty of political entities, of states or rulers. Then, Baldwin would be posing the question: how can we think sovereignty without authoritarianism?

Idolatry and Theology

When Baldwin discusses religious ideas – that is, when he does more than employ religious language for rhetorical force – he contrasts two types of theology, or, more properly, idolatry and theology. Idolatry is the religion of his father, of Richard Wright, and of Elijah Muhammad, to name a few. Theology is Baldwin's own constructive proposal for how religion ought to fit together. Commitment to idolatry leads to (and is fed by) confusion, anger, hatred, and fallacy; correct theology results in to communion and salvation. Baldwin has much more to say about idolatry than theology. This is because the primary content of theology, for him, is the critique of idolatry, and Baldwin is always critiquing idolatry.

On Baldwin's account, idolatry, first and foremost, is motivated by the desire for safety, which in turn is motivated by fear of death. "Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human

trouble is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have” (E339). Because we fear death, we turn to symbols, rituals, and institutions which promise us safety – but at a high cost. The “principles governing the rites and customs” of churches, black and white, are “Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principles necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others” (E305). Christianity most often functions as idolatry, offering ways to worship but ultimately concealing truth, ultimately enforcing blindness about ourselves and our worlds. The result is that we feel alone, that we fear, and so we seek safety – back in church.

The desire for safety may be the desire to know that one is saved in the afterlife, or it may be the desire to live in a neighborhood free of crime, or it may be the refusal to acknowledge one’s own complicity in sin. Closely related to the desire for safety, but often concealed, is the desire for innocence. Baldwin worries that the desire for innocence necessarily simplifies the world, overlooks the way that we are not in control of ourselves, overlooks the way that sinful histories continue to shape us, and overlooks the culpability we have for the actions of those with whom we relate, even when their actions are not clearly caused by our own. We make distinctions and create categories that insulate us, keeping us safe, protecting our innocence, and we cling to them with religious fervor. We make out of our history a myth, refusing critical engagement in favor of stories about the past that comfort us in the present. Idolatry is supremely dangerous: “The dream of safety can reach culmination or climax only in the nightmare of orgasm or genocide” (ET102). Safety ultimately means complete elimination of that on which one’s fears are projected, or complete pseudo-communion in rape. It motivates hate crimes which, even when committed by an individual alone, represent idolatrous “communion.” Such

hate crimes are acts of pseudo-religious sacrifice of the innocent: “the orgasm of the mob is drenched in the blood of the lamb” (E840; cf. Girard).

The quintessential form of idolatry, for Baldwin, is the belief in a white god. Sometimes this white god has a religious name, but not always. Belief in a white god entails belief in a black devil, in blackness as evil. As Baldwin puts it, “the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar” (E294). Whites are safe when sin is projected onto blacks, allowing whites to ignore their own misdeeds and the complications of their own lives – and to ignore the fact that the fantasy of blackness was created by whites. Baldwin sympathetically cites Booby Seale’s notion that “one of the things that most afflict white people is their disastrous concept of God; they have never accepted the dark gods, and their fear of the dark gods, who live in them at least as surely as the white God does, causes them to distrust life” (E437). Life, for Baldwin, is what idolatry conceals. It is complex, impossible to systematize, and always morally ambiguous.

The idolatry of the white god also affects blacks. Some blacks believe it: they believe that whites are inherently superior. This is the problem, Baldwin asserts, with Wright’s Bigger Thomas. “Bigger’s tragedy is ... that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth” (E18). This is also the problem with Baldwin’s own father (Baldwin, it should be noted, describes Wright as “alas! My father” E253). Despite angrily rejecting whites’ belief in God (he describes them as heathen), he accepts their theology. As Baldwin writes in the letter to his nephew that begins *The Fire Next Time*, his father “was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him. This is one of the reasons that he became so holy”

(E291). Baldwin's father believed, in effect, that by becoming a better idolater he could be saved; this is why he was defeated.

Others blacks, such as Elijah Muhammad, construct their own gods in opposition to the white god, but in so doing reproduce the structure of idolatry – the desire for safety, innocence – that comes with the white god. Baldwin feels as if Muhammad is asking him, “who’s little boy are you?”, the essential appeal for safety and innocence: for a father-protector, for a god-sovereign. And he feels as if Muhammad is volunteering his services as substitute-father. Baldwin appreciates the anger that motivates Muhammad, the urgency with which he speaks, and the need to affirm the worth of black life. But Baldwin cannot accept that race is fundamental to theology, only to idolatry. Further, he cannot accept the mystification of the past that he felt the Nation of Islam promoted. Baldwin cannot accept a substitute father. He must honor his own father – his Christian father – by developing a more compelling theological vision, a political theological vision. Essential to this vision is the notion that idolatry, ultimately, is cowardice: it is faithlessness.

“Complexity is our only safety,” Baldwin writes (C165). Baldwin's own statement of the theology he has developed, found in a late essay, begins by repudiating fear and the desire for its elimination as a religious motivation. “Salvation is not precipitated by the terror of being consumed in hell: this terror itself places one in hell. Salvation is preceded by the recognition of sin, by conviction, by repentance” (C164). Idolatry, religion motivated by fear, results in damnation; souls are saved when they have faith and turn away from sin – coolly, as it were; motivated not by immediate emotion but by clear perception. Baldwin does not offer a crisp statement of what he means by sin, but he specifies that it is “not limited to carnal activity” and such activity is not “the most crucial or reverberating of our sins” (C164). Once salvation is

approached in this way, we near supreme communion, “union with all that is or has been or will ever be” (C164). This vision of union is also specific and personal. It involves making whole our broken selves, and making whole our broken relationships with others. Salvation is approached but never achieved. It is a process that happens in time rather than a one-off event. As a process, Baldwin maintains that the need for faithfulness and disavowal of sin (both themselves processes, and interconnected ones) is immediate: as he famously writes, “The time is always now” (E214). This temporality of redemption helps to decipher the apocalyptic conclusion of *The Fire Next Time*. If the faithfulness and disavowal of sin are not happening now, salvation is impossible: we are condemned to damnation.

This is not simply an expansive use of religious rhetoric, adding oomph to a moral or political argument. Baldwin describes salvation as a relationship with God (“accepting and reciprocating the love of God,” C164), although of course the theological and the political are inextricable here. I am arguing that we should understand God in Baldwin’s theology negatively, as the name for what remains when idolatry is rejected, rather than metaphorically. Some would see Baldwin as affirming, in the tradition of American Transcendentalists, transcendence without the transcendent, a sense of the divine without God. Such a reading misses the specifically Christian commitments that Baldwin maintains. Unlike the Christian caricature of Judaism, as a religion in which salvation is achieved by strictly following rules, in Baldwin’s theology salvation has already been achieved for us. We just need to accept it, accept it by rejecting false belief. Baldwin develops a specifically Christian name for this acceptance: love. In a sense, the idolatries that Baldwin rejects are precisely those that Christ rejects: the beliefs of those who claim to condemn in the name of God, who cultivate fear for their own benefit, and who refuse to

critically examine themselves and their worlds. Specific worldly practices are not needed, on Baldwin's account; all that is needed is faith, lived in daily life, manifesting as love.

Secrets of the Heart

Baldwin writes, "[T]he value of the human being is all that I hold sacred" (C205). But, given the deeply Christian outlook that informs his theological (and political) writings, Baldwin is not best understood as a humanist. He is not simply rejecting the projection of human desires onto a god-father and instead affirming the divinity of the human, her inherent worth and dignity. Baldwin does, indeed, value the human being greatly, but he values the human being insofar as the human being contains the image of God – remembering that, for Baldwin, the image of God is the rejection of idolatry, is that which exceeds and eludes human concepts. The "human riddle," writes Baldwin, is that a "mightily, unnameable, transfiguring force ... lives in the soul of man" (C56). This soul, in which Baldwin clearly and emphatically believes, is a mystery, and that mystery humbles us, and reminds us that the world is saturated with mysteries that no ideology can ever explain. The attempt to explain them, to the soul or to the world, inevitably does violence, both metaphorically and literally. Yet the attempt to understand the soul, and the world, is crucial: this is Baldwin's main article of faith. It is a task of understanding that will always fall short. Our job is to try again, and to fail better. This is just the opposite of the humanist claim to respect the human being for certain reasons, because of certain attributes. Baldwin calls for reverence, not respect, and this reverence is due precisely because the human has a soul that is indescribable, that is incomprehensible by reason. Accepting such ineffability is difficult work; it is the work of faith. But the indescribable nature of the soul is the only proposition which, for Baldwin, deserves the label of truth.

Particularly in Baldwin's early writings, what might be called, somewhat misleadingly, the question of identity is the driving force. It is not quite right to call this the question of identity because the answer to the question, of who Baldwin is, of who the protagonist is, is an essential opacity accompanied by an affirmation of the continuing urgency of the question. This is the flip side of Baldwin's account of fatherhood (and God): the object in question has overwhelming importance, and requires rigorous attention, but will never yield clarity, except that one must clearly reject those who peddle in clarity. Of his adolescent experience as a pious Christian, Baldwin writes, "I rushed home from school, to the church, to the altar, to be alone there, to commune with Jesus, my dearest Friend, who would never fail me, who knew all the secrets of my heart. Perhaps He did, but I didn't, and the bargain we struck, actually, down there at the foot of the cross, was that He would never let me find out" (E307). The young Baldwin, puzzled by his changing body and desires, sought clarity in God, who knew what the boy could not discern about himself. In this religious phase, this idolatrous phase, Baldwin delegated the task of self-examination to God (it had once been delegated to his father). This is the structure of idolatry that Baldwin would later disclaim, the thought, *deep down I have a secret that God knows*, rather than, *knowing that deep down I am opaque is how I can know God*. The former thought is what leads to pathologies, sexual and political; it supports blindness, the desire for safety. The latter thought motivates self-examination, and it gives meaning to life – Baldwin affirms the Socratic maxim that the unexamined life is not worth living (E391).

The opacity of the human being makes the human being sacred, that is, marks the image of God in the human. Recognizing that essential characteristic (or rather non-characteristic) of humans is what allows for communion: we recognize that "all men are brothers" (C205). Baldwin writes that Americans are "in desperate search for something which will help them re-

establish their connection with themselves, and with one another” (C6). In a world of heterogeneity, community can only be achieved by recognizing and probing the sacred opacity of each human, and so reverencing each human (this is, for Baldwin, salvation). The result is neither heterogeneity nor homogeneity, but complex connection. The world conspires to conceal essential humanity, to categorize people by race, and in other ways, asserting that color marks humanity all the way down. In doing accepting this, we are refusing our own humanity. As Baldwin remarks, “It is a terrible, an inexorable, law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one’s own: in the face of one’s victim, one sees oneself” (E179). A victim is not attacked because of who they are but because of what they are, because of the way their humanity is categorized. An attacker deceives himself into believing that questions of who can be reduced to questions of what, a belief applied to the victim and so becoming definitive of the attacker.

All humans, even the most stubborn and prideful, contain a sacred remainder, and they sense it. Such a remainder manifests as charisma. As Baldwin writes of his father, “there was something else in him, buried in him, which lent him his tremendous power and, even, a rather crushing charm. It had something to do with his blackness, I think – he was very black – with his blackness and his beauty, and with the fact that he knew that he was black but did not know that he was beautiful” (E64). Baldwin’s father was black, that is what he was, but he was also more, he also had a sacred remainder – a remainder that was good, and true, and beautiful – but it was a remainder of which Baldwin’s father was unaware. He was not totally unaware; that was the source of his charisma, of his power. Baldwin sees in the white world only the faintest hints of a sacred remainder, of a who beyond a what. The secrets of the heart can continually be contained, the categories structuring the world seeming to fit well. But this is a refusal. When the terms

“you think describe and define you inevitably collide with the facts of life,” we are posed with “a very narrow choice.” We can do as Baldwin’s father did, and have a mighty but tragic power, or we can say “*Yes, Lord*. Which is to say yes to life” (C73, Baldwin’s emphasis). We can welcome God by welcoming his image in our hearts. Blacks are confronted with this choice more pressing than whites, and this is a grand opportunity. Baldwin concludes, of blacks, “[T]o grow up under the necessity of questioning everything – everything, from the question of one’s identity to the literal, brutal question of how to save one’s life in order to begin to live it” (E431). In this way, blacks have privileged access to the sacred, live with that “tremendous spiritual condition.”

Most people do not have an opportunity to reflect on the ways that the world misrepresents them. Most people depend on the wisdom of the world, on the concepts and categories of the world, to go about their lives. (Most blacks realize there is misrepresentation at work but do not have time to reflect; most whites do not realize there is misrepresentation). Writers are the exception. Such reflection is the writer’s vocation, according to Baldwin. It is, in a not particularly metaphorical sense, a religious vocation, in pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful. The only “real” conversation Baldwin ever had with his father, he recalls, is when his father asked him, “You’d rather write than preach, wouldn’t you?”, to which Baldwin responded, “Yes” (E80). The religion of the father is preaching, the law; the religion of the son is writing, grace. Preaching is the practice of idolatry; writing is practical theology. Writers, he writes, are “the only people who know the truth about us” (C42). He adds, “Art is here to prove, and to help one bear, the fact that all safety is an illusion. In this sense, all artists are divorced from and even necessarily opposed to any system whatever” (C42). Baldwin is not here proclaiming allegiance to art for art’s sake. He is making a theological assertion, a negative

theological assertion: the pursuit of the beautiful (aligned with the true and the good) means the rejection of all worldly attempts to describe the beautiful, the true, or the good – the rejection of “any system whatever.” The alienation of the artist – “for reasons he cannot explain to himself or to others, he does not belong anywhere” (C42) – is not alienation at all, but faithful commitment to the ineffability of the human soul, to probing the secrets of the heart. In so doing, the writer reminds those who are swept up in the inertia of ordinary life about that “mighty, unnamable, transfiguring force” that resides within them, and within every human being – and so, the writer serves to the reader words as communion wafers, making of humanity a sacred unity, and bringing redemption. At least this ought to be the writer’s aspiration, writes Baldwin.

The writer, as a member of the spiritual elite, embodies freedom, and the writer is an evangelist for this freedom. For Baldwin, freedom, genuine freedom, is not freedom from constraint, nor is it freedom as constraint, freedom achieved by following a set of religious rules. Rather, Baldwin understands freedom in a highly Christian sense: “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32; E432). Freedom comes when we are not constrained by worldly concepts and categories, when idolatries are discarded and we are left in what remains, which is truth. Americans, Baldwin charges, make freedom synonymous with comfort, that supreme idol. On his view, in contrast, “to be free ... you have to look into yourself and know *who you are*” (C70, Baldwin’s emphasis). Baldwin describes realizing that he, like his father, was not free, that he was in bondage to his hatred, of whites. Whiteness, after all, is a worldly category, and the ultimate idol. The result of Baldwin’s bondage: “I thus gave the world an altogether murderous power over me ... in such a self-destroying limbo I could never hope to write” (E8). Acknowledging and accepting that feeling of hatred, rather than repressing it, made

him free: free of the world's power over him, not to "be himself" in some anodyne sense, but to participate in the beautiful, the true, and the good: to write.

No Salvation Without Love

Baldwin's early work poses a question, and makes questioning the answer. Later, Baldwin offers a new answer, an even more Christian answer. *Who am I? I am a lover*. When idolatry is refused, when we realize our essential identity, the proper response to that opacity is not simply reverence; it is love. Like writing, love is difficult. "Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up" (E220); love is "quest and daring and growth" (E341). This work, though offers a rich reward. Baldwin writes, "[O]nly that work which is love and that love which is work will allow one to come anywhere near obeying the dictum laid down by the great Ray Charles, and – tell the truth" (E426). Baldwin's early work focused on the opacity of the self while his later work focuses on the opacity of others, of those we love (including ourselves). When we experience love, we realize that we cannot control our lover, not with our bodies or our desires or our concepts. For the same reason, we cannot merge with our lover, despite our desires. Love happens as we explore the opacity of the other, as we desire to know her (as we desire to know ourselves), knowing that we will never know her, knowing that we can at best fail better. In that process of failing better, fueled by desire, comes pleasure – not from attaining or capturing an object but from accepting distance, accepting it as sacred. "When two people love each other, when they really love each other, everything that happens between them has something of a sacramental air" (B143).

Put another way, if writing is a practice for the spiritual elite, Baldwin turns later to love as a practice for the masses. Baldwin recalls that his first love affair, in France, taught him the

significance of love as a practice accessible to all. Love, he found, “was breathing and belching beside me, and it was the key to life. Not merely the key to *my* life, but to life itself” (E365). In other words, love offers access that world beneath ideology, beneath concepts that always misrepresent. Love does not offer this access through fantasy or through the imagination, but through the direct contact it entails with the unsentimentalized realities of life: “breathing and belching.” Through love, according to Baldwin, “the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within” are removed (E341). In other words, love functions to expose and critique idolatry. But love also names Baldwin’s eschaton, the state in which all idolatry has been removed, the state of perfect communion. This is not, in fact, a state, but a process in which we participate when we love. In other words, we do not love (or write) so that we can eventually achieve a state of perfect harmony, of communion. The work of loving (or writing) is itself participation in that communion. In political terms, we do not struggle so that one day we can live in peace. We struggle because the process of struggling itself is desirable – indeed, is salvific. “There is absolutely no salvation without love” (C164-165).

Love, for Baldwin, means seeing rightly (a formulation that strikingly resonates with the reflections of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch). When we love an object, we see it in truth, its imperfections as well as its virtues. We are compelled to be honest about both. Baldwin describes himself as a lover of America, and so a critic of America. If his affection for America resulted only in praise, it would not be love at all but fantasy. Love allows its object freedom to be what it is, and so assures that the lover maintains her own freedom, to live truthfully. Baldwin asserts that blacks are privileged lovers of America because the stakes are so high in their ability to see America rightly: their life depends on it. Is it then the case that seeing rightly requires love in the same way that love requires seeing rightly? Baldwin would seem to respond in the

affirmative, for the process of seeing rightly, of carefully observing, and reacting, recalibrating, observing some more, the process of what Simone Weil would call attention, *just is love*. It brings with it affective investment. It is not a process directed at most objects in our worlds, just those we care about – whether because of our desire or by necessity. (Similarly, the writer only writes well about things she cares about). For most objects in our worlds, we accept the wisdom of the world; we regurgitate the things most people say about them. This is why Baldwin's theology remains pre-eschatological. This side of the eschaton, it is only in small corners of our lives that we can aspire to see rightly, truthfully – to love.

Idolatrous love is motivated by fear; it distorts and it controls. It is, in fact, not love at all. Baldwin describes his youthful preaching in this way: "I hoped to love them more than I would ever love any lover and, so, escape the terrors of this life" (C160). Eventually, he realized the destitution of such love, how it made him "a liar." "I did not want my love to become manipulation. I did not want my fear of my own desires to transform itself into power – into power, precisely, over those who feared and were therefore at the mercy of their own desires" (C160). Such love produces sexual pathologies: consider Baldwin's story, "Going to Meet the Man," in which a white policeman is only able to make love to his wife when remembering the arrest and lynching of black men. Whites, on Baldwin's view, systematically deceive themselves in all areas of their lives. Because of their privileged position and their desire for safety their fantasies are not tested against the realities of life, so their love is systematically deformed. It often requires the presence of blacks, on whom unacknowledged fear and desire is projected. But this is a service which blacks can, and should, according to Baldwin, refuse. The only hope whites have of salvation lies in blacks who might genuinely love them: "we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality" (E294). Blacks

have privileged access to truth, and to the truth about white Americans; it is truth, practiced in love, that brings salvation.

Genuine love, because it is love of who rather than what a beloved is, disregards race: “one must accept one’s nakedness” (E366). The nakedness involved in love, whether of baby or lover or aging parent, or nation, brings with it vulnerability, exposure, risk: the opposite of safety. This points towards the political implications of Baldwin’s account of love. It is an ethical practice, a practice that teaches us to live well, and to live well together. Love prepares us for democratic politics: when our souls are accustomed to uncertainty and risk, and to the distortions of worldly wisdom, we are well equipped for the precariousness of democratic political processes, processes that demand commitment and imply contingency at once. Moreover, it is the least of these – in the case of Baldwin’s America, blacks – who are best equipped for democratic politics. Whites, because of the unexamined fears and desires accompanying their loves, including their love for America, enter democratic deliberation with anti-democratic tendencies.

In Baldwin’s political theology, must authorities love? Baldwin concludes that his father, despite much harsh treatment and apparent cruelty, did, in fact, love his children, albeit “in his outrageously demanding and protective way” (E64). His father’s love was misshaped by hatred and fear, distended but not destroyed. Fatherhood brings love because it brings attentiveness, close observation from birth through life. Love, Baldwin asserts, is “constant” even if “we may not always think so” (E339). This seems quite different from the love Baldwin described in France, the love that first awakened him to love. But for Baldwin there is only one type of love, for truth is unequivocal. Love may be more or less intense, may be more or less revelatory, but it is still love, whether it is of a sexual partner or a father or a son. Indeed, love blends into

sensuality, which Baldwin describes, in rather religious terms, as presence, “from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread” (E311). Indeed, the closeness of the protagonist and his brother in *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* – they hold each other in bed, and masturbate together – points to the way Baldwin blurs the lines between intimacy, love, and sensuality. Ratcheting up the intensity of love is desirable because it thrusts the lover towards truth. Hence Baldwin promises his nephew, Big James, to love him “hard, at once, and forever, to strengthen you against the loveless world” (E292). Given the pervasive distortions of the world, given the prevalence of idolatry, it is necessary for fatherly figures to love as much as possible. Love, says Baldwin, provides a home, but home does not mean safety and security. It means being comfortable with risk, with the precariousness of life.

Love or Lust?

Political theology has traditionally focused on political and theological concepts of sovereignty; Baldwin’s negative political theology, naming as idolatry each attempt to establish a sovereign authority – sovereign God, sovereign father, sovereign self, and political sovereign – offers a refreshing alternative approach. Politically troubling, however, is Baldwin’s second move: christening what remains after (or, better, through) the critique of idolatry love. This is politically troubling because love stands astride the division between ethics and politics. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, famously suggested a deep connection between love and social justice, yet love is also a virtue, one of the three theological virtues, together with faith and hope. If all Baldwin were claiming for love was its ethical relevance, that it shaped the soul in a way that made citizens ready for democratic deliberation, say, this seems reasonably defensible. But Baldwin claims something more. For him, love happens between individuals, sexually, between

family members, between friends, between enemies, between citizens and nations, and between authorities their subjects. He suggests that there is genuine love and a false kind of love, animated by fear and unacknowledged desire. But beyond this distinction, Baldwin offers no help in picking out what we might call, following Augustine, rightly ordered love (Gregory). There can be no right ordering, on Baldwin's account of love, because love precisely names that which is without norms, that which remains when worldly concepts recede.

Baldwin's novels, most of all *Another Country*, explore the varieties of love and desire, and the way that race in America shapes desire. But Baldwin has a tendency to remain descriptive, rather than normative, when giving accounts of desire: they are all part of the work of love, all examples of failing, and then failing better. Even in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, where Baldwin has a very clear position with respect to authority, accounting for its transfer from father to God catalyzed by the self's opacity, he remains curiously equivocal on his protagonist's sensuality, particularly his attraction to the older Elisha. Sensuality is present in the narrative, but does not do work, and goes nowhere, other than as evidence of our opacity to ourselves, evidence of the self's sacred remainder. Read in light of Baldwin's later work, where this opacity is named love, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* becomes a struggle between idolatrous loves, of father and God, and genuine love, the sensual/sexual love of John and Elisha, a love emanating directly from the boys' opaque selves, a love performing the end of idolatry.

I worry that the political potency of love, which comes about when love is connected with justice, is lost when love is placed in a realm free of norms. Recalling his relationship with his father, paradigmatic for his relationship with authority, Baldwin decides that "serving the Lord", the god-father, means putting new content in old form. "All of my father's texts and songs, which I had decided were meaningless, were arranged before me at his death like empty

bottles, waiting to hold the meaning which life would give them for me” (E83). Such images point to the distance at which Baldwin holds norms. His father provides empty bottles that can be filled with anything; it is only the bottles that are given. Paternal love might involve struggle, but it is the struggle to make sense of what is given; whatever results from that struggle (essentially with oneself) will be free of judgment. Every art project receives an A+ so long as it is not captive to the father’s rules. But what can it mean to work with the father’s texts and songs but not the father’s rules, not his judgment?

It was with the rise to national prominence of Martin Luther King, Jr., that Baldwin began extolling love, but for King love and power were always deeply entwined. As he famously put it, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” In contrast, it seems that for Baldwin power is necessarily disjunct from love. The imperative to love may demand the use of power, to oppose idolatry, but this use of power is instrumental. Certainly, for Baldwin love is not an end state but a process, a struggle. But this struggle, which happens through worldly things – words and bodies – is directed towards a communion of souls free of worldly things. Put theologically, the worry is about the desire to bring about the eschaton in a world of sin, and the degrading of creation that results. For Baldwin, we can approach redemption when worldly distinctions are eliminated, between familial and sexual love, between love and sensuality, between love of nation and love of self. Bodies and pleasures mingle without form as souls commune. But in the Christian tradition the image of God in humans is not an indiscernible secret of the heart soliciting love. It is manifested in words and bodies; it is these that are to be loved. These are to be loved for the way in which they image God, for their beauty, goodness, and truth. All words

and bodies participate in beauty, goodness, and truth to some extent, but that extent varies. It is in this way that love, power, and justice combine. Loving rightly does not require accepting and so bracketing all worldly distinctions to commune with the soul; it requires judging worldly distinctions, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, and embracing the good and the beautiful while using power to correct the bad and the ugly. Baldwin has much to say about lust: about its motivations in fear and false consciousness, specifically, in fantasies of racial difference. But instead of seeing lust as disordered love in need of correction, he places it in a different category than love, which is blind to race. This is the position of Baldwin's essays; in novels such as *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*, Baldwin seems to be doing quite the opposite: teaching the reader lessons in how love can be disordered, lessons in the continuity between love and lust.

Baldwin generally avoids discussing political institutions (are we to love the President? the presidency?). This could lead us to read Baldwin as, strictly, a political theorist of social movements, movements that can, more plausibly than political institutions, be animated by love. But Baldwin does consider, in both his fiction and non-fiction, one political institution: the judiciary. The legal system brings to the fore the issue with which Baldwin's political theology is least well equipped to deal: judgment and condemnation. Judgment, of course, is the essence of courts; ideally, judgment animated by justice. Baldwin's negative political theology reserves judgment and condemnation only for idolatry, not for individuals. To condemn an individual, for Baldwin, implies a commitment to idolatry. Baldwin describes condemnation as "fueled by terror and self-hatred": "Salvation repudiates condemnation, since we all have the right, for many reasons, to condemn one another. Condemnation is easier than wonder" (C165). Law enforcement is, expectedly, viewed by Baldwin as theology gone wrong: as idolatry.

Both the white fundamentalist minister and the deputy are Christians – *hard-core* Christians, one might say. Both believe that they are responsible, the one for divine law and the other for natural order. Both believe that they are able to define and privileged to impose law and order; and both, historically and actually, know that law and order are meant to keep me in my place. (C161-162, Baldwin’s emphasis)

The legal system, like Christianity of the worst sort, condemns, and the burden of condemnation most often falls on the backs of blacks. Yet what Baldwin’s alternative would be, in the political rather than religious realm, remains unclear. His reconfiguration of theology does not so easily transform into a reconfiguration of politics. What is a court system that would reverence the souls of the accused?

Baldwin writes, “I do not claim that everyone in prison here is innocent, but I do claim that the law, as it operates, is guilty, and that the prisoners, therefore, are all unjustly imprisoned” (E444). It is unclear what implications Baldwin intends from statements such as these. It is clear, from his reflections elsewhere, that he is not simply concerned with particularly high incarceration rates in the United States, or particularly harsh prison conditions (though he is concerned with them). Baldwin is concerned with the institution of the prison itself, and the prisoner. But it is unclear whether he is saying that prisons should be abolished (together with courts?), or if he is reminding us that any human institution that purports to judge guilt and innocence will fail in that task. This latter claim seems to be, in effect, a reminder that there is sin in the world, that we live on the near side of the eschaton, rather than a statement about politics. If politics means figuring out how to live together in a fallen world, it does not seem to be a topic that interests Baldwin much at all. Making judgments, for individuals, is inescapable, but when judgment is institutionalized it becomes farcical. “Each of us knows, though we do not like this

knowledge, that a courtroom is a visceral Roman circus. No one involved in this contest is, or can be, impartial ... the ability to suspend judgment is, in each of us, suspect” (ET1).

The injustice of the criminal justice system is a theme that pervades Baldwin’s writings, from his early autobiographical essay about his arrest in Paris through his reflections on the persecution of the Black Panthers juxtaposed with the persecution of his much more anonymous black friend Tony in *No Name in the Street* to his late account of the Atlanta child murders, and the trial that resulted, in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen. If Beale Street Could Talk* is a novel that entirely revolves around unjust policing and imprisonment. Police harassment follows Fonny, and lands him in jail for rape, navigating a byzantine legal system with the “help” of a morally ambiguous lawyer. Fonny’s friend, significantly named Daniel, is released from prison and tells of the horrors he experienced. Fonny reflects on his own captivity, realizing that he is not in jail because of his acts, and the other prisoners are not, either. “These captive men are the hidden price for a hidden lie: the righteous must be able to locate the damned” (B192). In contrast to the world of unjust and irrational condemnation in *Beale Street*, Baldwin presents a world of love: Tish’s love for Fonny. It is love that reveals truth: she is our trusted narrator, giving us an honest account of her experiences, an honest picture of the misunderstood Fonny (who only wants to create, to sculpt). The world is dishonest, its norms and concepts misleading, to the extent that Tish and Fonny can live honestly only when they use names that have no relation to their own (Clementine and Alonzo). *Beale Street* is such a hopeless novel because the two worlds, of love and of justice, have nothing to do with each other.

This worry about Baldwin’s account of love may be addressed by recalling his account of writing, for love and writing do the same work of revealing truth. They are both, for Baldwin, spiritual practices. Writing has the effect of conveying truth, but the writer does not simply write

truth. “I do not like people who are *earnest* about anything,” he writes (E9, Baldwin’s emphasis). To write truth – to write *earnestly* – would be to suppose that words had the ability to represent reality perfectly, but they do not. Words do quite the opposite, on Baldwin’s view, functioning as idols, keeping us safe from the complexity of ourselves and our worlds. The writing that Baldwin commends manipulates, persuades, in the service of truth. The “protest novel,” in contrast, manipulates and persuades in the service of politics. Baldwin does not position his own writing as apolitical, but as doing politics better, more thoroughly, more rigorously. To do the work of persuasion that is necessary for writing, the writer must be “thoroughly disciplined”, must be fully versed in social norms (and the norms of literary traditions) (C8). The writer looks out onto a mix of the good and the bad, the true and the false, the beautiful and the ugly, and the writer produces work that draws an audience towards the good, the true, and the beautiful. The writer does not simply condemn the false and wallow in truth. The writer does not condemn, that would be too earnest, but her writing has the effect of condemnation, the effect of judgment.

Yet Baldwin’s account of love seems to be missing this sense of judgment, this acknowledgment of the power of lovers, their partiality, the condemnation that can be implicit in their love. All of that Baldwin casts as accompanying lust. The result is that Baldwin’s political theology, his constructive account of love, is apolitical. It is his negative political theology, his dogged critique of idolatry – of ideology – that is of lasting import.

Works Cited

James Baldwin:

B: *If Beale Street Could Talk*. New York: The Dial Press, 1974.

C: *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.

E: *Collected Essays*. New York: The Library of America, 1998.

ET: *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985

N: *Early Novels and Stories*. New York: The Library of America, 1998.

René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Clarence E. Hardy, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and the Crisis in Black Holiness Culture*.

Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003.

Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970.

Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 2005.

George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

1987.

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*. London: Ark, 1987.