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RECLAIMING THE HUMAN SELF: REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING AND SPIRITUAL SERVICE IN THE WORKS OF JAMES BALDWIN

by

FRANCINE LARUE ALLEN

Under the Direction of Professor Thomas McHaney

ABSTRACT

James Arthur Baldwin argues that the issue of humanity—what it means to be human and whether or not all people bear the same measure of human worth—supersedes all issues, including socially popular ones such as race and religion. As a former child preacher, Baldwin claims, like others shaped by both the African-American faith tradition and Judeo-Christianity, that human equality stands as a divinely mandated and philosophically sound concept. As a literary artist and social commentator, Baldwin argues that truth in any narrative text, whether fictional or non-fictional, lies in its embrace or rejection of human equality. Truth-telling narrative texts uphold human equality; false-witnessing texts do not. Baldwin shows in four of his novels the prevalence of the latter narrative type. Within the fictional societies of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979), Baldwin reveals how society's powerful bear false witness against the marginalized through stereotyping social narratives. However, Baldwin uses his novels to show the humanity of the marginalized. In so doing, he connects his works, as well as the works of contemporary black literary artists, to the concept of Christian spirituality.

INDEX WORDS: Humanness, Discourse, Faith, Prophet, Bible, Religion, Redemption, Modern African American writers, Apocalypse, Social Narratives

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by

FRANCINE LARUE ALLEN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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December 2005

Dedications

This work is dedicated to my father and mother, Robert and Frances Allen Mayo, who have always been my very best friends, my greatest supporters, and my faithful counselors. I wish also to dedicate this work to the memory of William Allen, D.V.M.

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Introduction

Review of the Literature

James Arthur Baldwin, born August 2, 1924, in New York City, joined the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly church in 1937 and became, at the age of 14, a boy preacher. At the time, according to biographer James Campbell, Baldwin "knew the Bible so well that he coloured his phrases with Old Testament rhetoric and poetry, with full conviction" (10). However, by the time Baldwin was 17, he had decided to leave the pulpit, unhappy about what he saw as the lack of love within the church and desiring to become a novelist and playwright, believing, Campbell says, that "the sacred . . . was not the only domain to scrutinize in search of 'everlasting life'" and that "the Holy Ghost might be identified here on earth, among human beings, in works of art" (21-22). After graduating from high school and working several menial jobs, he began writing book reviews and essays for various publications while also trying to develop his fiction- writing skills. In 1948, frustrated with America's racial problems, he left for Paris, eventually seeing the publication of his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, in 1953 while there. He returned to America in 1957, engaging himself in the civil rights movement and becoming a lecturer at various universities. He eventually returned to France, dying there on December 1, 1987.

His faith, his artistry, his social and political concerns—all serve as the diverse subject matter of his fiction and nonfiction. This diversity has given critics great flexibility when choosing issues to focus upon when examining his writings.

Baldwin's Faith

In the 1980s and 1990s, critics Sondra A. O'Neale and Michael Lynch investigated Baldwin's complex relationship with Christianity. O'Neale focused primarily on Baldwin's faith while Lynch connected Baldwin's faith to his political concerns, a connection that Donald B. Gibson made twenty years earlier in his description of Baldwin as a moralist.

In "Fathers, Gods, and Religion" **Sondra A. O'Neale** argues that Baldwin's works speak of Christianity in non-traditional ways, questioning God's working in the world and pointing out error in the traditional black church, an institution that so many African-American writers before him had highly regarded. According to O'Neale, Baldwin frequently observed the disconnect between the Christian believer's profession of faith and the believer's demonstration of that faith. In trying to understand God, Baldwin questioned why God allowed so many troubles to befall the black race despite its consistently demonstrated faith in Him. O'Neale says that Baldwin's observations and questionings served as evidence of his belief in God and his attempt to discover God's identity and His relationships to black people:

> On the surface one cannot ascertain whether or not Baldwin is a 'religious writer' because his works do not reflect the traditional treatment of Christianity in black American literature. Instead, Baldwin examines the enigmas of human affections absent in Christian professors; the failure of the Christian God to thwart the persistent onslaught of His African children; and the insistence of those children to forge a 'normal' dependent interaction with that God. These witnesses are empirical evidence of God in Baldwin's world,

> and he exploits them to excess so that he can mold a composite God, discover His personality, and fathom His intentions toward black people (1988, 126).

According to O'Neale, Baldwin greatly changed African-American literature, not only as the last black writer in America to present a thorough discussion about African-Americans and their relationship with Christianity, but also as one writer, among others within the black literary establishment, who did not exalt the black church. Baldwin's unwillingness to present the black church as an ideal entity was different, however, from the unwillingness of other black writers. Writers such as Nella Larsen in *Quicksand* (1928) and Richard Wright in *Black Boy* (1945) rejected Christian faith while criticizing Christian hypocrisy. Baldwin, on the other hand, continued to value many teachings of the faith even as he admonished the Church for its hypocrisy. O'Neale suggests that Baldwin's primary concern with Christian philosophy, outside of its employment for hypocritical purposes, was its strict guidelines concerning sexual normalcy. In works such as *Giovanni's Room* and *Just Above My Head*, he shows homosexuality to be "an acceptable form of human love" (1988,140). O'Neale says that because of Baldwin's efforts to point out hypocrisy in the black church and to make homosexuality acceptable, he "opened the floodgate for contemporary anti-Christian, non-biblically based black American literature" (1988, 140).

While O'Neale focuses on Baldwin's non-traditional treatment of the faith, critic **Michael Lynch**, a decade later, notes that Baldwin's concerns as a writer were twofold: spiritual and political. In his discussion of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* in "A Glimpse of the Hidden God," he notes that many critics from the 1960s onward criticized Baldwin as being polemical. Yet, Lynch argues that such a critical view of Baldwin arose out of an effort to emphasize Baldwin's political concerns more than his spiritual and personal concerns.

According to Lynch, what one really sees when reading Baldwin is Baldwin's attempt to reconcile his spiritual and political concerns:

> The inaccurate charge that Baldwin polemicizes his writing from [the early or mid-60s] is rooted in critics' positing the individual and/or spiritual over against the political, an opposition Baldwin attempts to reconcile. In my view, his later work achieves more complexity than the prevailing assessment contends because he does not become a polemicist and because as a dialectical thinker he continues to respect and maintain the necessary vital tension between spiritual vision and political reality. (1996, 31)

A year later in his discussion of Baldwin's last novel, *Just Above My Head*, published in 1979, Lynch, like O'Neale, notes that Baldwin's criticism of the church and of Christians in no way suggests that Baldwin dismissed concern for the spiritual. He says that Baldwin, even in leaving the pulpit at 17 and criticizing Christianity for the way in which it was used to promote racism and injustice toward blacks, was still very much committed to Christian ideals and themes. Despite Baldwin's commitment, Lynch says that "scholarship . . .has offered no sustained treatment of [Baldwin's] religious thought or theology" (1997, 285).

The tendency by many critics to overemphasize Baldwin's political views, giving little concern to his spiritual and personal concerns was noted too by an earlier critic, **Donald B. Gibson**. Gibson says in "James Baldwin: The Political Anatomy of Space" (1977) that many have labeled Baldwin a political radical because of his willingness to freely express his concerns over issues of race. Gibson says he disagrees with this label, explaining that Baldwin's views on race always assumed the eventual end of evil and the triumph of good. Gibson concludes, then, that Baldwin, rather than being a political radical, was instead a

moralist, someone more concerned with issues of right and wrong than with issues in the political arena, someone always more critical of society in terms of its morality than in terms of its politics.

Writing, Art, Narrative Techniques

While some Baldwin criticism has dealt with Baldwin's faith, his morality, and the relationship that these share with his politics, another body of criticism has focused upon Baldwin's life as a writer and his views on art. In the early and late 1970s, Fred Standley, Edward Lobb, and Kalamu ya Salaam explored Baldwin's personal objectives for writing and his general views on art. Similarly, other critics talked about Baldwin's writing strategies and the impact these strategies had in broadening the view of his works. In the mid-70s, critic Shirley S. Allen noted how Baldwin's use of biblical symbolism lent universality to his fiction. Likewise, critic John Shawcross, writing in the 1990s, said that an examination of Baldwin's narrative technique revealed Baldwin's connection to novelists such as James Joyce.

In "The Artist as Incorrigible Disturber," **Fred Standley** argues that many had developed an improper assessment of Baldwin, seeing him more as a political figure than an artist, missing the fact that Baldwin's struggle for the rights of blacks was linked to his vision regarding his role as an artist and his view of the world as grounded in Christian philosophy. According to Standley, Baldwin's fight for the rights of black Americans was not an adjunct to his writing; rather, working for civil rights was integral to his being a writer: "This is not to deny that Baldwin has been an outspoken activist in the struggle for social, economic and political justice for the black minority in American society; rather it is to affirm that the

exercise of such communal responsibility was consonant with Baldwin's view of himself as a man of letters and not merely an adjunct to that vocation" (1970, 44).

The connection between writing and social responsibility was one that Baldwin actually spoke of during an interview with **Kalamu ya Salaam**. In the interview, Salaam reminded Baldwin of what he had said at one time about the duty of the writer being the actual act of writing. Baldwin said that this view of the writer was actually complicated. On one level, Baldwin said, the fact that a writer should write says something about a particular activity—writing—just like the term "dancer" described a particular activity--dancing. On another level, Baldwin said that being a writer meant doing away with the comfortable: " 'The role of the writer *is* to write, but this is a cryptic statement. What I meant is that a writer doesn't dance. His function is very particular and so is his responsibility. After all, to write, if taken seriously, is to be subversive. To disturb the peace'" (1988, 36).

This definition by Baldwin of what it means to be a writer can be viewed in light of his views regarding what makes for good art. In an article entitled "James Baldwin's Blues and the Function of Art," **Edward Lobb** examines Baldwin's 1957 short story "Sonny's Blues," finding in the story Baldwin's implicit arguments about art. In the examination, Lobb says that Baldwin argues that good art is art that resides in reality, art that is connected to life and hope, and art that deeply examines the universal pains of humanity:

> Beyond the narrative events of "Sonny's Blues," then, is a level of symbolic discourse on the relation of art and life. Art is distinguished from fantasy by contrast with heroin and the cheap satisfactions of film and television; it is associated with light, sound, and form, and stands against darkness, silence, and 'fear and trembling.' But if it is to be good art and provide a true picture

> of experience, it must include the elements it fights against—hence the paradoxical nature of Baldwin's emblems of art: the union of darkness and light, of fear and the trembling which shakes things apart, of the roar from the void and the order of music (1979, 148).

Lobb's mention of "fear and trembling" suggests that he has detected spirituality in Baldwin's aesthetics. In the 1950s when various writers were exploring and using the Christian existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard, author of *Fear and Trembling*, it would have been understood that "fear and trembling" was often a prelude to a leap of faith. According to Lobb, Baldwin argued that society frequently chooses bad art over good art: "In 'Sonny's Blues,' the themes of art and life converge, for the chief obstacle to our obtaining a clear view of the past, individually or as a people, is simply our preference for bad art, for the pleasant lies which the media peddle and we in our sadness desire" (148).

This wrong view of art, which, as Baldwin suggested, results in individuals preferring bad art, is accompanied by another erroneous view—the tendency to see literary art produced by minorities as literature exclusively about minority life. This latter tendency is one that plagued many readers and critics of Baldwin, according to **Shirley S. Allen.** In discussing Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), in the article entitled "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality, Allen argues that many critics, while proclaiming *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to be Baldwin's best novel, saw the novel merely as a discussion about black life and culture and compared it to *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*: "but the major conflict of this novel, unlike *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*, is not black against white, but the more universal problem of a youth achieving maturity, with literary parallels to *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and Hawthorne's "My Kinsman,

Major Molineux" (1975, 167). Allen observes that many critics were not as familiar with the Bible as Baldwin was; therefore, they did not recognize the universality of his novel:

> A contributing factor to the misinterpretation of the novel is Baldwin's extensive use of Biblical allusion and Christian ritual for symbolic expression of the psychic realities he wishes the reader to experience. . . . Because the symbolism is essential to understanding *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, critics, missing the clues, have found fault with Baldwin's art. . . . Perhaps a better understanding of the symbolism would lead to critical re-evaluation, since Baldwin's most serious 'technical fault' may be his assumption that most readers are as familiar with the Bible as the members of his childhood Harlem community were. (168)

The Bible, however, has been but one factor shaping the universal nature of Baldwin's works, according to **John Shawcross** in his article "Joy and Sadness." Shawcross says that along with Biblical symbolism, Baldwin used various narrative techniques such as framing, flashbacks, mythic substruct, and onomastics. Shawcross argues that a study of Baldwin's narrative techniques reveals how the novel presents universal themes, not merely culturally specific concerns. The novel shares with Milton's *Paradise Lost* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* the myth of initiation in which a child or youth leaves the mother's womb and enters into the world (1983, 104). According to Shawcross, much of the critical work done on Baldwin does not address Baldwin's skill and techniques as a novelist. Rather, when reviewing Baldwin's fictional works, most critics focus exclusively on the subjects that his novels touch and what these subjects say about society and about Baldwin himself. This is especially true, according to Shawcross, of

Baldwin's novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*. While biographical and sociological inquiry may help in understanding Baldwin's novels in general, Shawcross concludes that studying Baldwin's narrative technique is imperative in helping one see how Baldwin's works transcend the mere observation of culture or the expression of his own early life.

Baldwin's Social Views: America, Women, and Homosexuality

While Shawcross seems to advocate a study of Baldwin that begins with an examination of the author's narrative techniques, such criticism for Baldwin has indeed been rare. Instead, most criticism, as noted, looks at the various subjects addressed in his works, focusing on those subjects in the light of Baldwin's life and his relationship to society. In the 1970s, critic Daryl Dance discussed Baldwin's views on home and community by examining Baldwin's first visit to the South, and critic Trudier Harris in 1980 examined the role of women in Baldwin's novels, in both cases without considering the persistence of images that expressed issues of spirituality and faith.

In "You Can't Go Home Again: James Baldwin and the South," **Daryl C. Dance** discusses Baldwin's feelings about Africa, feelings expressed by many other African-American writers such as John Williams, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright—that Africa was a remote place, not a place that one could call home even though one desired to embrace it as home: "In his research for his roots the American Negro quite naturally turns to Africa. And yet for many Black Americans, the separation from their African homeland and many aspects of its culture was so complete that Africa remains a far-off, remote land from which they are irretrievably estranged" (1974, 55). Dance mentions how Baldwin in "Notes" for *The Amen Corner* writes that even France, despite his many positive experiences there,

would never truly be his home even if he lived there forever. (56). According to Dance, in returning to America from Europe, Baldwin went first to New York, but in order to complete his journey to find his identity, he also went South, despite his fears about the trip. In the South, Baldwin remarked how he felt at home, meeting people who were secure and certain of their identity. Yet, despite feeling at home he felt that he also could not return to the South, doubting he could do what was required to survive as a black person there (59).

Part of that doubt may be related to something critic **Trudier Harris** argues in "Willing Scapegoats for the Male Ego." Harris observes that Baldwin dramatizes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* how difficult life is for women, whether they live in the south or the north. In Baldwin's fiction in general, Harris says black women are seen primarily in association with the fundamentalist church in the black community. These women, so focused on their roles in relation to the church and the community, fail to recognize their individual needs. Any failure on their part to center their lives upon God and others, particularly men, leads to community scorning. As a result, these women are left feeling guilty when they experience moments of being self-concerned. This condition inspires one element of Baldwin's meditation on religion. According to Harris, the women in *Go Tell It* "are at the beginning of a progression of women in Baldwin's fiction who will never be free until they free themselves of both the secular and the sacred domination in their lives" (1985, 13).

The yoking of the secular and the sacred is what **Raymond-Jean Frontain** tries to do when analyzing Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956). In "James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and the Biblical Myth of David" Frontain discusses homosexuality, traditionally seen as belonging to the secular realm, and relates it to the sacred myth of the friendship between

David and Jonathan found in I and II Samuel. According to Frontain, Baldwin uses the biblical myth not only to talk about the fulfillment of love after death, something past critics have done, but also to present the possibility of men sharing greater affection for each other than they share with women. Frontain describes Baldwin's purpose in using the myth as an attempt to show that the myth was "the great tragic archetype for love between males" (1995, 54). Frontain points out what he sees as several similarities between the myth and the novel. First, the main characters are named David and Giovanni, Giovanni being Italian for Jonathan. Second, as in the biblical story, the character David grieves deeply over the loss of his friend. Third, just as the biblical myth presents Jonathan as the one showing greater love for the fictional David than David for him, so too does Baldwin's Giovanni—or Jonathan—express greater love for David than David does for him.

Dissertation Focus: Institutional Oppression as the Nemesis of Human Equality

This focused attention on the theme of love permeates all of Baldwin's fiction and non-fiction. According to Angelo Robinson, "When Baldwin left the church at age seventeen to 'continue his ministry' as a preacher without a church, he continued to declare a message of love for the body and the soul. His ultimate wish for mankind is a testament to this belief as he continued to advocate for a society filled with Christian love" (2005, 349). In placing high value on love, love between individuals and within communities, Baldwin also decries oppression, that force which makes love impossible. According to Baldwin, evidence for the way in which oppression hindered love appeared in the very life of his stepfather David Baldwin, a clergyman and factory worker, who, in living with the racial oppression of his time, "claimed to be proud of his blackness but [who knew that] it had been the cause of much humiliation and . . . had fixed bleak boundaries to his life" ("Notes of a Native Son,"

1955, 129). The bitterness that developed in response to a life of constant humiliation and bleak boundaries left his stepfather, Baldwin says, incapable of properly expressing love to his children:

> When he took one of his children on his knee to play, the child always became fretful and began to cry; when he tried to help one of us with our homework the absolutely unabating tension which emanated from him caused our minds and our tongues to become paralyzed, so that he, scarcely knowing why, flew into a rage and the child, not knowing why, was punished. If it ever entered his head to bring a surprise home for his children, it was, almost unfailingly, the wrong surprise and even the big watermelons he often brought home on his back in the summertime led to the most appalling scenes. ("Notes of a Native Son," 1955, 129)

Baldwin saw from his father and from many others that bitterness, the frequent response to oppression, left individuals incapable of loving themselves and others. Thus, for him, oppression as a subject matter was integral to his discussion of love.

Baldwin argues that oppression is largely a manifestation of institutions, therefore, in America, where oppression is often fueled by racial animosities, "there [is] simply no possibility of a change in the Negro's situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure" ("Down at the Cross," 1963, 370). Baldwin points, though, to the Christian church, or, rather, some within it, for manipulating scripture and theology and, thereby, fathering a philosophical and theological framework that other institutions have used in initiating and endorsing oppressive practices. Evidence for the Christian origins of Western institutional practices lies in the fact, according to Baldwin, that

the Christian Church is the primary power structure in the West: “The Christian Church still rules this world, it has the power, to change the structure of South Africa. It has the power if it will, to prevent the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. It has the power, if it will, to force my government to cease dropping bombs in Southeast Asia” (“White Racism or World Community,” 1968, 441).

Yet, despite worldwide authority, Baldwin says that the Church has often abandoned the genuine basis of its power—the teachings of Christ—and opted, instead, to grab for political and social power. In order to do this, it has manipulated Christian doctrine so as to transform it from a philosophical system that assumes every human being’s innate humanity to a philosophical system that ranks human worth and, thereby, endorses the rejection of certain groups from political and social systems, making of them a marginalized and oppressed class.

> Now, this is not called morality, this is not called faith, this has nothing to do with Christ. It has to do with power, and part of the dilemma of the Christian Church is the fact that it opted, in fact, for power and betrayed its own first principles which were a responsibility to every living soul, the assumption . . .that *all* men are the sons of God and that *all* men are free in the eyes of God and are victims of the commandment given to the Christian Church, ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ (“White Racism or World Community,” 1968, 438)

Baldwin claims that “the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation” (“Down at the Cross,” 1963, 71). With that being the case, distorted Christian doctrine has so infiltrated and menaced

American society that institutional manifestations of oppression can be understood in the context of how individuals are positioned in relation to God.

Baldwin dramatizes this in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). In the novel, the protagonist John is oppressed—abused verbally and physically—by his stepfather Gabriel, a church deacon who justifies the oppression based on what he determines to be John's connection to God. In the novel, John reflects upon his stepfather's attitude about him: "His [step]father had always said that his face was the face of Satan,--and was there not something in the lift of the eyebrow, in the way his rough hair formed a V on his brow—that bore witness to his father's words?" (27). In being associated with Satan, John is positioned away from God. This positioning strips him of his humanity because, in Christian theology, to be human is to be naturally and intimately connected to God since God is thought to have created humanity. To be disconnected from God by being aligned with Satan is to be linked to sub-humanness, inhumanness, human perversion, considering that Satan exists in contrast to God. And, since God is thought to be the embodiment of all things good and desirable—righteousness, love, beauty, wisdom, power, hope, peace, etc.—to be associated with Satan is to be linked to undesirable characteristics: evil, hate, ugliness, ignorance, weakness, despair, confusion, etc. Thus, it is quite natural that Gabriel, while saying that John has the face of Satan, would also say that John is ugly (18). In a proper, undistorted theological framework, beauty and ugliness are matters of character. Being like Satan and being ugly are the same, being godly and being beautiful are the same since, as New Testament theologian David Dockery says, "beauty is similar, if not synonymous, with God's glory" (55). However, Gabriel uses a distorted framework that turns beauty and its binary opposite, ugliness, into

physical attributes, aligning John, because of his physical appearance, with Satan and disassociating him with God.

Baldwin suggests that other institutions have taken a cue from those, like Gabriel, who have used a distorted Christian philosophical and theological thought, and have fashioned oppressive practices by setting up a godlike and devil-like framework, with many non-character-based factors, including race, serving as symbolic representations of God and Satan. When such a framework is constructed around race, godliness is represented by whiteness and devilishness is represented by blackness. Thus, to be white is to be human and beautiful and good and wise and powerful; to be black is to be subhuman and ugly and evil and ignorant and powerless. When such a framework is established and accepted by, for instance, institutions of law, individuals are treated differently based on race. Those who are associated, because of their skin color, with devilishness are viewed and treated as non-humans. Thus, for instance, in Baldwin's fifth novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), evidence for the way in which law enforcement has been shaped by the historical influence of distorted Christian theology, theology that aligns blackness with Satan, appears when Fonny, a character in the novel, describes himself and the other inmates as "captive men [who] are the hidden price for a hidden lie [because] the righteous must be able to locate the damned" (207). In Fonny's description, the jailed, primarily African Americans, are the damned; the jailers—the righteous—are Caucasians. Fonny, in describing himself and the other inmates as captive men who are damned, is suggesting that prison is hell, hell being a place, according to Christian theology, wherein individuals have no escape. In hell, individuals are captive, having sealed their eternal fates by rejecting God for Satan. However, in modern institutions, such as the institution of law, wherein an adopted, distorted theology

operates, those individuals labeled as captive and damned are labeled ungodly, not because they have rejected God, but because of their race. This distorted (lying) theological or philosophical framework is the hidden lie that Fonny describes; it is a hidden framework because it has become so engrained within modern institutions that no one really appears conscious of its operation. In other words, it has become natural to associate blackness with evil and whiteness with righteousness. This distorted framework, this hidden lie, exacts, as Fonny says, a hidden price—oppression. Baldwin seeks to make society aware of the hidden price being paid by those who, because of their race or other factors, have been damned and held captive, who have been marginalized. He seeks to make society aware of the inherent immorality of requiring the marginalized to pay a hidden price; he seeks to reveal the untold damage of such a requirement and to present survival strategies to those who are paying a hidden price, who are being oppressed. Considering that, this dissertation examines Baldwin's argument that oppression, being rooted in the way modern institutions demonize-dehumanize individuals, is philosophically unnatural and causes those who have been demonized great personal suffering, suffering that will destroy them unless their innate humanity is affirmed and unless they learn, by tapping into the spiritual tool of service, to affirm the humanity of others who are also being oppressed, who are also paying a hidden price.

Overview of Chapters

Toward this goal, Chapter I discusses three points in regard to Baldwin: (1) how he makes a constant cry in his essays, fictional works, and interviews for the right of all people, no matter their differences in race, nationality, or social status, to be regarded as innately and equally human; (2) how he parallels ideas expressed by both the Apostle Paul in Galatians

and by faith-minded civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. in viewing human equality as a divine mandate; and (3) how he, like the Apostle Paul, sees the proclamation of human equality as the proclamation of truth itself.

Baldwin suggests that the truth of human equality is usually proclaimed via texts—truth-telling texts—and that these texts must compete with many false texts emanating out of modern institutions, texts that dismiss notions of human equality. The prime textual form for these false texts is, according to Baldwin, the social or journalistic narrative. As such, Chapter II turns to narrative theorists and linguists, including J. Hillis Miller, William Labov, and Roland Barthes, and to "official" accounts and to journalists who disseminate them in order to examine the function and structure of these kinds of false narratives. This examination is followed by a discussion of four of Baldwin's novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979), looking at how Baldwin, throughout his fiction-writing career, from his first two to his last two novels, attempts to show the way in which false (or lying) texts within society compete with truth-telling texts. In the fictional societies of these novels, Baldwin observes how false narratives rule. In other words, these stereotyping social narratives, whether found in newspaper stories or police reports, discuss marginalized characters in ways that divorce them from their particular history or context and, as a result, present dehumanizing, demonizing images of them, images that square with a silently operating and distorted theological framework. Chapter II shows how Baldwin interrogates this framework, using his novels as narratives that, though fiction, connect characters to their history and reveal their humanity.

However, Baldwin's ironic treatment is such that only those outside of the fictional societies of the novels—that is, the readers—know the full humanity of the characters; only for them is the framework shaken. Within the fictional societies of the novels themselves, an erroneous theology remains intact, and false images of characters stand as truth. In portraying the ways in which false narratives within these fictional societies seem to triumph by regarding Baldwin's characters as non-reasoning animals or devils, the writer shows, as presented in Chapter III, how the dehumanized and demonized are made to suffer greatly. Yet, in drawing from the notion of redemptive suffering as understood in the African-American faith tradition, Baldwin reveals how some of these characters overcome what would have been suffering's inevitable destruction of them as they gain human affirmation from others and use what has become spiritual insight into their humanity to serve other sufferers, helping them to see a vision of their human selves as well.

Service stands for Baldwin, then, as the key for survival in an oppressive society, as a way for the oppressed to confront and to escape in part, if not completely, their captivity. Serving others enables the individual who has been damned, demonized, and dehumanized to see his humanity, despite social constructions that malign him, enables him to help others see their humanity. In Chapter IV, I argue how Baldwin, whether conscious of it or not, exalts what has been the essence of spirituality in Judeo-Christianity and in the largely Christian-based faith tradition of African Americans from which he derives. Baldwin thus points to the demonstration of service by individuals within their communities as that which constitutes Christian spirituality in contemporary African-American literature. In a time when many in the black cultural establishment have relegated spirituality in literary works to the display of the supernatural or to church-related activities and when many in the establishment have

viewed Christianity as an irrelevant context for understanding spirituality, Baldwin shows, in his emphasis on service, not only how spirituality stands as a relevant issue in literary works that do not showcase the supernatural or the church but also how Judeo-Christianity serves as a viable context for understanding spirituality.

Chapter I

No Longer an Outsider: The Biblical Underpinnings of James Baldwin's Call for Human Equality

For African-Americans in general, seeing scripture as a solid ideological framework for understanding the world has allowed them throughout history to refute claims that they lacked human worth. Their use of scripture to understand the world and to claim their humanity is evident, in part, in the life of James Baldwin, who credited his three years as a boy preacher for enabling him to become a literary artist, an artist who felt, as he said, that "no label, no slogan, . . . no skin color and, indeed, no religion, [was] more important than the human being" (*James Baldwin: The Price)*. A basic scriptural concept embraced by Baldwin and those in the faith community, particularly those like him who participated in the civil rights movement, was that of the innate and equal humanity of all peoples, a concept that Christ lived out and that the Apostle Paul sought to reclaim, especially in his address to Christians at Galatia, an ancient Roman province. This concept, as understood in scripture, provided for Baldwin, as it had done for the Apostle Paul, not only a way of analyzing conflicts between various racial and ethnic groups, but also a way of identifying what constitutes truth and falsehood in written texts and a way of understanding how texts grounded in truth speak up for human equality by calling for the right of every individual to live out his humanity freely.

The Scriptural Worldview Embraced by the Black Faith Community and Baldwin

Africans in early America and their descendants have generally found that faith, a faith strengthened by scripture, not only affirmed their humanity but also guided them as

to how they could maintain that sense of affirmation in the face of social degradation. In traditional Africa, the power of faith was evident in that many African languages had no word for religion, since God was thought to exist everywhere (*This Far By Faith*, 2003*).* Theologian Cain Hope Felder says that belief in God was not a new concept for Africans new to America:

> Africans in the Americas did not enter the New World with a religious and cultural *tabula rasa.* They came with remembrances of the past, including their rich oral tradition of the griots' stories of life, death, and rebirth. They came to America with memories of a religion that was the source of life and gave meaning to it through the power of the spoken word. (*Troubling Biblical Waters*, 1999, 84)

In the New World, some Africans brought with them a faith in traditional African religions. For others, a faith in Islam, and for still others, Christianity, constituted established systems of belief, their ancestors having been heavily and intimately involved, according to Felder, in the development and maintenance of the biblical story from the Old Testament to the New Testament ("The Presence of Blacks, " 1999*).* This already well-established faith gave descendants of the African a means of dealing with oppression and dehumanization. According to Cornell West, Africans fresh to the New World used religion to remake and recreate themselves. Faith reminded them that they were children of God. Theologian James Cone says that without faith, without the belief that they were more than who the world said they were, the slave and his progeny would not have been able to survive (*This Far By Faith*, 2003).

Since Christianity, at least Europeanized Christianity, was the religion of the slave masters, many of these Africans and their descendants found their innate human worth in God as viewed by this faith, more specifically, in God as understood by evangelical Christianity. Yet, it was a Christianity that they reshaped to meet their needs. It was in the embrace of Christianity, Felder believes, that the African-American community became deeply committed to the written word—the Bible—particularly the stories and themes of slavery and freedom in the Old Testament and the figure of Christ in the New Testament:

> It is well-known that the Bible has come to occupy a central place in religions of the Black diaspora. Whether in slave religion or independent Black churches of the Americas and the Caribbean, biblical stories, themes, personalities, and images have inspired, captivated, given meaning, and served as a basis of hope for a liberated and enhanced material life. They have enriched the prospects for a glorious afterlife, as well. [. .] . Even beyond the confines of African-American religions, Black people are fundamentally people of the Book. (*Troubling Biblical Waters* , 1989, 5)

The use of scripture among African Americans as a context for understanding how the world operates was evident in the life of James Baldwin. According to critic Sondra O'Neale, Baldwin, a child Pentecostal preacher from the ages of fourteen to seventeen, "absorbed all facets of Christian doctrine, denominational practice, and most importantly, biblical image, symbol, narrative, and meaning" in his youth ("Fathers, Gods," 1988, 131). This would explain why, as biographer David Lemming says, the language, the patterns, and the struggles of the Bible were important to Baldwin. Baldwin himself says that what turned him into a writer were the three years he spent in the pulpit, having to deal with "anguish and

despair and beauty" (*James Baldwin: The Price)*. Michael Lynch says that though Baldwin left the pulpit at seventeen and though he frequently criticized religious hypocrisy, he remained invested in a Christian worldview:

> Contrary to the prevailing critical view, Baldwin's investment in Christian ideals and themes did not end when he abandoned his role as preacher in a Harlem fundamentalist church at age seventeen. Although Baldwin bitterly attacks Christianity over the course of his career for what he sees as its condoning of racism and injustice toward African Americans, he develops a theology based on Christian ideals and on his individual quest for a loving God. ("Just Above," 1997, 285)

Critic Shirley Allen points to Baldwin's thorough knowledge of scripture. In discussing his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), she says that Baldwin extensively uses "Biblical allusion and Christian ritual for symbolic expression of the psychic realities he wishes the reader to experience" (1988, 167). Allen says that critics have often misinterpreted and found technical fault with *Go Tell It on the Mountain* because they have not understood the symbolic importance of the novel's religious setting. According to Allen, "Baldwin's most serious 'technical fault' may be his assumption that most readers are as familiar with the Bible as members of his childhood Harlem community" ("Religious Symbolism," 1988, 170). This Harlem community in which Baldwin lived was merely a transplanted southern community which meant, according to him, that he too was a southerner and, thus, deeply committed to faith:

> "I am, in all but in technical legal fact, a Southerner. My father was born in the South—no, my mother was born in the South, and if they had waited two

> more seconds I might have been born in the South. But that means I was raised by families whose roots were essentially rural--. [Their] relationship to the church was very direct because it was the only means they had of expressing their pain and their despair" (*King, Malcolm, and Baldwin*, 1963, 53).

The influence that Christian philosophy, as found in scripture, had upon Baldwin is reflected in the fact that Baldwin, according to Donald B. Gibson, discusses social problems and their solutions in moral terms, in terms of what is universally acceptable or unacceptable:

> . . . [Baldwin] has continually spoken about racism as a moral problem and has rarely related it, until very recently, to social forces of other kinds. He is primarily an institutionalist who has been critical of the society almost exclusively in moral terms. He has only recently begun to speak at all about the relation of racism to other social phenomena, having assigned it in his mind to the realm of morality. In this regard he has distinguished himself from black nationalists and socialists who have tended to see the problem and its solution far more in economic and cultural terms than he. (1981, 100)

Baldwin's tendency to describe racism as a moral problem is evident when, speaking in the early 1960s, he says that racial tension reflects the lack of concern that Americans in general have for what constitutes right and wrong behavior when relating to one another:

> I'm terrified at the moral apathy, the death of the heart, which is happening in my country. These people [who discriminate against others on the bases of race] have deluded themselves for so long that they really don't think I'm human. I base this on their conduct, not on what they say, and this means that

> they have become in themselves moral monsters. It's a terrible indictment. I mean every word I say. (*King, Malcolm, and Baldwin,* 1963, 56)

In his concern for morality, despite being highly critical of the church and religious hypocrisy, Baldwin, as Lynch says, "must be considered a theological writer, one who continually wrestles with the identity and meaning of God and whose debt to Christian ideals informs his own evolving vision" ("Just Above," 1997, 290).

Human Equality as Viewed by the Black Faith Community and Baldwin

Like others in the African-American faith tradition, Baldwin embraced the figure of Christ, finding in Him human equality—a belief in the humanity of all peoples as expressed in agape, communal love. Baldwin, like those in the faith tradition who became active in the civil rights movement, found in the texts of the Apostle Paul reason to refute those who, instead of embracing human equality, wished to create degrees of human worth.

For the black faith community, including Baldwin, Christ's ministry, that is, His teachings and miracles on earth and His death on the cross for the salvation of all, assumed that human beings were equally loved by God and, thus, equally human. According to Felder, "In the New Testament, apart from the apocalyptic Book of Revelation, Blacks have focused almost singularly on Jesus Christ and the divine, unconventional *agape* [divine, unconditional love] that God refracted through Jesus' ministry and resurrection" (*Troubling Biblical Waters,* 1989, 18). This divine love enabled Christ to see the humanity of society's castaways and to shamelessly fellowship with them. Christ's ability, as recorded in the Gospels, to see all people, even society's marginalized, as fully human, is what Baldwin says he found attractive about Christ, despite the hypocrisy of Christian followers:

> But what Christians seem not to do is identify themselves with the man they call their Savior, who, after all, was a very disreputable person when he was alive and who was put to death by Rome, helped along by the Jews in power under Rome. And everyone forgets that. So, in my case, in order to become a moral human being, whatever that may be, I have to hang out with publicans and sinners, whores and junkies, and stay out of the temple where they told us nothing but lies anyway. [. . .]. . . . it still seems to me a terrible crime to profess one thing and do another. (Mead, 1971, 89, 91)

While both the black faith community and Baldwin himself saw the ministry of Christ as proving that human equality existed as a divine ideal and mandate, they, like the New Testament writer the Apostle Paul, clashed with those who opposed such an ideal. As recorded in the New Testament, after the resurrection of Christ, the concept of human equality comes under attack. Judaizers try to persuade the Galatians to accept Jewish practices and law. According to Felder, this angers the Apostle Paul:

> Paul shows himself to be very upset with the results produced by these opponents. Their arrogance as Jewish Christian missionaries has led them to present themselves as a higher class of representative of the Jerusalem church. [. . .]. . . .[Paul was outraged] over the *class presumptions* of his opponents and the ways in which the Galatians themselves have deferred to this *class consciousness* that Paul vigorously contests. (*Troubling Biblical Waters*, 1989, 110)

In Romans, Paul explains the erroneous nature of class superiority. He adopts the Old Testament scripture, II Chronicles 19:7, which warns Jews against showing partiality in legal proceedings and adapts it to New Testament times, saying in Romans 2:11 that God does not regard Jews as being better than Gentiles. Paul tries to convey to the Galatians that God is their ultimate authority, not Judaizers or other men. Because God is their ultimate authority, they, via the Gospel, are to believe and obey Him and not Judaizers (*Troubling Biblical Waters*, 1989, 111-112).

This Pauline concept was adopted by Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others in the black faith community, particularly those, like Baldwin, who were involved in the civil rights movement. According to Charles Marsh, scripture proved for civil rights advocates that "human dignity . . .would be forever grounded in an ontological [reality-based] fact" ("The Civil Rights Movement"). In a sermon given at Ebenezer Baptist Church on Christmas Eve in 1967, King alluded to Galatians 3:28 wherein Paul speaks of there being no distinction between Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ. King said that attempts to deny individuals human dignity could cease if human beings would but recognize the innate humanity of all peoples:

> One day somebody should remind us that, even though there may be political and ideological differences between us, the Vietnamese are our brothers, the Russians are our brothers, the Chinese are our brothers; and one day we've got to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. But in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. In Christ there is neither male nor female. In Christ there is neither Communist nor capitalist. In Christ, somehow, there is neither bound nor free. We are all one in Christ Jesus. And when we truly believe in the

> sacredness of human personality, we won't exploit people, we won't trample over people with iron feet of oppression, we won't kill anybody. (255)

Baldwin, like King, rebuked America for the ways that it had tried to make a difference, so to speak, between Jew and Gentile, between white and black. However, this discriminatory treatment that left him feeling like an outsider began, he makes clear, not with the racism in his country, but with the relationship with his father. In expressing the sense of being an outsider both in relationship with his father and to his country, Baldwin parallels the Apostle Paul in Galatians by alluding to the Old Testament story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. In Galatians, notions of inferiority are discussed in the context of illegitimacy and the father-son relationship. In Baldwin's works, according to biographer Leeming, "illegitimacy and [Baldwin's] almost obsessive preoccupation with his stepfather were constant themes" (3).

Baldwin felt like an inferior stepchild in relationship with his father. As a boy, Baldwin was described by his stepfather David Baldwin, according to Leeming, as the 'ugliest child he had ever seen" (6). To be labeled "ugly" was, for Baldwin, synonymous with being black and with being a stranger, an outsider, a reject of society, an unwanted or illegitimate child. Even when Baldwin grew up and realized that this labeling of him as ugly reflected his stepfather's black self-hatred (Leeming 7), Baldwin's feelings of being an outsider, a stranger persisted. According to biographer James Campbell, the fame that Baldwin received with the publication of his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) did not make him feel any less a stranger in relation to the white community:

> [With the publication and success of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin] was entitled to feel he had 'made it'. His talent had been noted; his name

> would be mentioned in future discussions of the younger generation of novelists; and whatever he chose to do now, over the next four or five years, he could count on the critics' attention.
>
> Yet no amount of worldly success—and this was nothing compared with what was to come—could bridge the gap between him and those people among whom he was residing in Europe, or between him and the people in New York, blood relations of the Europeans, now so enthusiastically ushering him into their studies and their offices, and on to their invitation lists. (84)

The idea of rejection, of strangeness, of outsiderness, of illegitimacy appear throughout Baldwin's fiction and nonfiction. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, for instance, Baldwin presents the character John, a young boy whose stepfather labels him ugly, saying that John bears the very face of Satan (19, 27). According to Hardy, for a time "John sees his face as that of Satan, fully accepting the lie his father told him, just as a young Jimmy Baldwin accepted what his father told him" (28). For the adult Baldwin, to be ugly and black was to feel, not only like an outsider in relation to the white community, but also, according to Hardy, distant from and unloved by God Himself, a feeling which led to emotional crippling:

> Ugliness does not simply describe a lack of attractiveness; in the context of Baldwin's life, ugliness is linked with a blackness that circumscribes and restricts the life chances of those who labor within its concealment and are unable to give or accept love. [. . .]. For Baldwin, the God of Christianity became a kind of 'primal father' who sees black people as ugly; this disregard sets the context for why so many people find ways not to love themselves or each other. (28)

Baldwin used this view of God as a 'primal father' who rejects his black stepchildren to describe how he and other blacks felt about America. In the essay "The Price of the Ticket," Baldwin explains how he and other African Americans felt a sense of illegitimacy or "outsiderness" during World War II, even as they fought in the war, because they knew that the gains of the war were not meant for them: "We [Americans] were fighting the Second World War. *We*: who was this *we*? For this war was being fought, as far as I could tell, to bring freedom to everyone with the exception of Hagar's children and the 'yellow-bellied Jap'" (1985, xv). In referring to African Americans as Hagar's children, Baldwin is referencing, of course, the story of the patriarch Abraham as recorded in Genesis. In Genesis, Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation and a symbol of God the Father, had two sons, one son by his slave Hagar and one son, later, by his wife Sarah. While God promises Abraham that Hagar's son Ishmael will be the father of a great nation, He promises Abraham that Sarah's son Isaac will be the father of many nations and many kings, particularly the King of Kings—the Messiah. Eventually, Hagar, the slave woman, and her illegitimate son, Ishmael, are made to leave Abraham's household, ensuring that Ishmael will not share in what has been promised to Isaac, the "real" biological son. Though Baldwin uses this Old Testament story as a context for pointing to the illegitimacy and thus, inferiority, attached to African Americans, he is not agreeing with that labeling. He seems, rather, to be speaking ironically, as he does, according to critic Shirley Allen, in his fiction, particularly in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, wherein his ironic use of "biblical language to describe an action contrary to the spirit of biblical precept . . . reveals hypocrisy in the pious" ("The Ironic Voice," 1977, 132).

Baldwin refers to African Americans as Hagar's children to suggest, as Paul does when talking about the Galatians, that they are not outcasts, that they are not illegitimate, that they are not outsiders. In Galatians 4:22, 28, and 31, Paul tells the Galatians, "For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free." Paul tells the Galatians that they are indeed legitimate children, by no means inferior to the Jews, because the only real division among people is that of faith—some claim faith in God through Christ and others do not. Since faith is all that distinguishes people from one another, attempts to use other factors such as ancestry, gender, or ethnicity as a basis for dividing people into opposing breeds of human beings, one breed being legitimate and superior and another breed being illegitimate and inferior, is improper. As Paul says in Galatians 3:26-29, "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye *be* Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Baldwin's ironic description of African Americans as Hagar's children is really Baldwin's way of identifying them as Abraham's seed while, at the same time, shaming American society. Baldwin seeks to persuade America to look critically at its behavior by considering the same sacred text that it has used, since the nation's inception, to justify oppression. Baldwin wants to confront American society with the fact that, though it would never use the term "Hagar's children" to describe African Americans or any marginalized group, it actually does worse—it treats them like such, like outcasts. It was this very

sentiment that Baldwin seemed to express when he, as a participant in the civil rights movement, met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy in 1963. During that year, Baldwin agreed, at the request of President John Kennedy, to convene a meeting that would include, not only Baldwin himself and the Attorney General, but other famous African Americans, including psychologist Kenneth Clark and playwright Lorraine Hansberry. The meeting was held on May 24 and was meant to help the President and Attorney General better understand the needs of African Americans. However, according to psychologist Clark, the meeting accomplished little, particularly after Attorney General Kennedy said that he understood the difficulties that African Americans were facing and wanted them to be aware that other people in America, including his grandfather who was an immigrant from Ireland, had experienced oppression also. Clark said that Baldwin responded to the Attorney General by saying, " 'You do not understand at all. Your grandfather came as an immigrant from Ireland and your brother is President of the United States. Generations before your family came as immigrants, my ancestors came to this country in chains, as slaves. We are still required to supplicate and beg you for justice and decency '" (*King, Malcolm, and Baldwin* 14-15). Yet, while calling upon America's majority to examine itself, Baldwin again follows the Apostle Paul in suggesting that human equality must stand as a precept by which the oppressor and oppressed live. Paul warns the Galatians that being legitimate and free, being insiders so to speak, is no cause for feigning superiority over those who do not claim faith in God through Christ. He warns the Galatians to use their status as legitimate children to treat all people well: "For brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only *use* not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Galatians 5:13-14). Baldwin seems to echo this

Pauline injunction to “love they neighbour as thyself” when he says that African Americans and, by implication, all those deemed by society to be inferior, jeopardize their actual innate human worth when they too begin creating hierarchical divisions for people, relegating their oppressors to the bottom of that division:

> I am very much concerned that American Negroes achieve their freedom here in the United States. But I am also concerned for their dignity, for the health of their souls, and must oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has been done to them. I think I know—we see it around us every day—the spiritual wasteland to which that road leads. It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: *Whoever debases others is debasing himself*. That is not a mystical statement but a most realistic one, which is proved by the eyes of any Alabama sheriff—and I would not like to see Negroes ever arrive at so wretched a condition. (“Down at the Cross,” 1963, 369)

It was the debasement of others that led Baldwin to point out flaws in some of the early efforts of Malcolm X:

> . . .what Malcolm tells [black students], in effect, is that they should be proud of being black, and God knows that they should be. That is a very important thing to hear in a country which assures you that you should be ashamed of it. Of course, in order to do this, what he does is destroy a truth and invent a history. What he does is say, ‘You’re better *because* you’re black.’ Well, of course, that isn’t true. That’s the trouble. (*King, Malcolm, and Baldwin,* 1963, 59)

The Proclamation of Human Equality through Truthful Discourse

In describing Malcolm X's early civil rights work, in part, as the destruction of truth and the invention of lies, Baldwin reveals the connection that he saw between human equality and the opposing themes of truth and falsehood. In this, Baldwin again shares an ideological kinship with the Apostle Paul. Both the Apostle and Baldwin describe the conflict for and against human equality as a clash between truth and falsehood, that is, between texts that tell the truth and texts that lie. Both writers suggest that truth, when it appears in written texts, fosters freedom, that is, a state in which individuals are allowed to make choices that enable them to live out their ideal humanity; however, falsehood in written texts ushers in bondage, a state of subhumaness, a state in which individuals are bullied into making life choices that result in their death both physically and psychologically.

The Apostle Paul points out in Galatians, a book emphasizing human freedom, how the battle for and against human equality manifests itself as a clash between sacred texts: the Jewish Law and the Gospel. He refers to the former text as a false text (1:6), and the latter text, as truth (2:5). Similarly, Baldwin couches his understanding of human equality as a battle between texts: truth-telling novels and false—or protest—novels.

According to the Apostle Paul, the Judaizers tried to assert their superiority over the Galatians by binding the Galatians with Jewish law after the Apostle had given them the Gospel, referred to in James 1:25 as the "perfect law of liberty." When the Galatians submitted to Jewish law, they were, in essence, accepting as fact their lesser worth in the sight of God. Since Jewish law was man-made rather than divinely inspired and, therefore, had no power to save anyone from sin, the Galatians, in submitting to it, were entrenching themselves in slavery, that is, sin and its consequences—death.

The symbolic equivalent of Jewish law, for Baldwin, is the narrowly focused protest novel. According to Baldwin, just as the Jewish law demeaned and enslaved the Galatians, many protest novels, by failing to show characters in their human complexity, by failing to explore why characters behave as they do, depicts society's marginalized as bearing little humanity. As such, these protest novels do nothing to further the freedom of the marginalized. A particular example of this, Baldwin points out, is Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1851-52 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. According to Baldwin, while Stowe's novel may seem complete, particularly considering Stowe's detailed descriptions of brutality, the novel still leaves "unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds" ("Everybody's Protest Novel," 1949, 28). As a result, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and many other protest novels, instead of furthering the freedom of society's marginalized people, entrenches the marginalized in their enslavement, in a state of bondage that kills off their humanity.

In making an ironic allusion to Galatians, Baldwin says that Stowe's presentation of Uncle Tom is an attempt to "bury, as St. Paul demanded, 'the carnal man, the man of flesh'" ("Everybody's Protest Novel," 1949, 30). The idea of "burying the flesh" appears in Galatians 5:24-25 wherein the Apostle says, "And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." The carnal or fleshly man, as the Apostle mentions it, is the sinful nature of humanity, that is, the part of humanity which opposes God and which is removed from the state of being ideally human, a state, as recorded in Genesis 1, that existed in paradise when humans lived out their ideal humanity, following the divine declaration of their being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). Theologian Millard Erickson says that the carnal or fleshly part of human

nature is unregenerate, unable to live out this goodness, this ideal humanity. Instead, it exists in a state of perverted humanity. However, through the Spirit of Christ, an individual can be transformed, having "the restoration of [his] human nature to what it originally was intended to be and what it in fact was before sin entered the human race at the time of the fall." This restoration, Erickson says, returns to an individual his "original [human] goodness" (301). However, Baldwin uses the term carnal man to suggest that, in the context of a racist society, the term "carnal man," when applied to the marginalized, describes the human being at his ideal. In other words, in a racist society, the humanity—the ideal humanity—of the marginalized is what those in power consider perverted, unwanted. Thus, they bury the carnal man; they bury who the marginalized person is at his best. Burying the man of flesh means for Uncle Tom, then, as Baldwin says, that he "has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex. It is the price for that darkness with which he has been branded" ("Everybody's Protest Novel," 1949, 30).

Baldwin suggests that, as a protest novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does not tell the truth; thus, it does not further the freedom of the marginalized. However, a truth-telling text, Baldwin says, arguing in a fashion similar to the Apostle Paul, participates in freedom, in the right of people to live out their ideal humanity, to make choices that promote the positive growth of their physical and psychological selves. In Galatians, the Apostle describes the Gospel as a truth-telling text, the very embodiment of truth, and formulates a connection between truth and freedom. According to Silva, "Among Paul's writings—indeed, among all the books of the Bible—none addresses the topic of freedom more forcefully than Galatians, a letter sometimes described as the Magna Charta of Christian Liberty" (271). In promoting God-given human equality--the equality of Jews and Gentiles in Christ--the Apostle explains

how the Gospel holds out freedom as the right of all people. No one is subhuman and thus deserving of being enslaved, of being kept back from what will enable him to become his best self. Baldwin argues similarly, suggesting that truth-telling texts, specifically novels, are texts which tell the truth by capturing the human complexity of an individual. Again, in speaking in the context of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he says that novels which do indeed reveal a character's humanity participate in the fight for freedom—the right of an individual to be regarded as a unique human being rather than as a stereotype, the right of the individual to be allowed to live out continually his humanness:

> [The word] truth . . . is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be chartered. This is the prime concern, the frame of reference; it is not to be confused with devotion to the humanity which is too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause; [. . .]. [The human being] is not, after all, merely a member of a Society or a Group or a deplorable conundrum to be explained by Science. He is—and how old-fashioned the words sound!—something more than that, something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves. It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims. [. . .]. . . .in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* we . . . [find that] the formula created by the necessity

> to find a lie more palatable than the truth has been handed down and memorized and persists yet with a terrible power" ("Everybody's Protest Novel," 1949, 28-29).

To tell the truth, then, for Baldwin, is to simply write about others so as to reveal their humanity. Anything less than that is to lie about them.

Conclusion

A worldview grounded in scripture has allowed African Americans to claim as fact the innateness of their humanity. The way that scripture has shaped how African Americans in general view the world is particularly evident in the life and writing of James Baldwin, who, as a boy, spent three years as a preacher. For Baldwin and for others like him whose faith empowered them to create the civil rights movement, the life of Christ and the teachings of the Apostle Paul, particularly in Galatians, upheld a concept of special importance—human equality. This concept, as the Apostle wrote about it, not only gave Baldwin a framework for understanding and calling for human equality, it also gave Baldwin a way of talking about what makes for truth and falsehood in written language and how truth—or a truth-telling text—contributes to freedom, an ideal state wherein human equality is possible. Yet, this ideal state, as Baldwin says, is one that humanity, because of the darkened state of its heart, often does not want, preferring instead to create classes of people: "People are not . . . terribly anxious to be equal . . . . [. . .]. I have met only a very few people—and most of these were not Americans—who had any real desire to be free. Freedom is hard to bear. It can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in spiritual terms, but the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation" ("Everybody's Protest Novel," 371).

Chapter II

Just Telling the Truth: The Battle between False-Witnessing Narratives and Truth-Telling Narratives in James Baldwin's Fiction

Baldwin's assessment of narratives as either fostering human equality by truthfully revealing the humanity of characters or hindering equality by falsely labeling society's marginalized as subhuman can be understood not only in the context of Baldwin's theology, but also in light of narrative theory, particularly considering Baldwin's work as a literary artist. In narrative theory, the related issues of what it means to be human and what constitutes human equality not only serve as the focus of narrative content, but also influence narrative structure. Narrative structures that decontextualize characters and events, separating them from the past, produce portraits that make characters appear subhuman. However, narrative structures that connect events and individuals to their past, to the history which led them to the present, reveal the humanness of the individuals. For Baldwin, the prophetic nature of his writing stems from his insistence that people and events be viewed in context, in connection to their history, in connection to what led them to the present moment. He shows in four of his novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979), how decontextualized narratives such as newspaper reports and police narratives dehumanize individuals, hiding the reality of who they actually are. However, Baldwin uses his novels as master, truth-telling narratives, trumping these distortions by placing characters in the context of their past and searching out all that reveals them to be fully human.

Humanness as an Issue for Exploration in Narratives

James Baldwin claims that black English has allowed African Americans to fashion an identity for themselves, an identity contrary to the one given to them by the language of the majority; therefore, black English is a viable language:

> The argument concerning the use, or the status or the reality, of black English is rooted in American history and has absolutely nothing to do with the question the argument supposes itself to be posing. The argument has nothing to do with language itself but with the *role* of language. Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in [the] case [of black English], [African Americans are] refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize [them]. ("If Black English," 1979, 649)

The identity that black English gives African Americans confirms for them, as Baldwin implies, their humanity; it creates for them a new reality, a new perspective on who they really are so that they—their personhood—will not be "submerged" by the identity given to them by the larger society's language, an identity that refuses to acknowledge their equal humanity (650).

The ability, as Baldwin suggests, of black English to bestow personhood is, according linguists, inherent to specific, structured forms of language such as narratives. In fact, linguists and narrative theorists suggest that human equality stands as a central topic in narratives and that the very purpose of narratives is tied to humanity's desire to understand what it means to be human. Linguists Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl point out how

discourse, however, including narrative discourse, is frequently a vehicle used both for legitimizing and discounting notions of human inequality, particularly in regard to race:

> [R]acism, as both social practice and ideology, manifests itself discursively. On the one hand, racist opinions and beliefs are produced and reproduced by means of discourse; discriminatory exclusionary practices are prepared, promulgated, and legitimated through discourse. On the other hand, discourse serves to criticize, delegitimate, and argue against opinions and practices, that is, to pursue antiracist strategies. (2001, 372)

Among the many types of discourses used to legitimize or delegitimize racism and a host of other ideologies that rank human worth, storytelling narratives seem to be one of the favored discourses because storytelling is an innately human activity and a way that human beings understand the world and evaluate themselves. According to rhetorician and linguist Barbara Johnstone, "The essence of humanness, long characterized as the tendency to make sense of the world through rationality, has come increasingly to be described as the tendency to tell stories, to make sense of the world through narrative" (2001, 635).

Fundamental Beliefs about Humanness Revealed in Narrative Order

The power of narratives to be an evaluative force, a type of discourse that can rank human worth, seems to be a power rooted in how narrative events are ordered and what various forms of narrative ordering say about fundamental issues such as what it means to have or lack humanity. According to J. Hillis Miller, the ordering of events in a narrative has a purpose, speaking to basic issues about existence:

> This structuring of events according to a certain design of beginning, end, and conventional trajectory connecting them is, it should be stressed, by no means

> innocent. It does not take things as they come. Reordering by narrative may therefore have as its function, as I have suggested, the affirmation and reinforcement, even the creation, of the most basic assumptions of a culture about human existence, about time, destiny, selfhood, where we come from, what we ought to do while we are here, where we go—the whole course of human life. (1995, 71)

While various narrative forms order events differently, those narratives that place characters and events in the context of their past are more likely to present humanizing portraits of characters than narratives that forsake the past to focus on characters and events as they are connected only to the present.

According to *A Handbook for Literature*, there exist two forms of narration which are differentiated by the manner in which they order events: "Simple narrative, which recites events chronologically—as in a newspaper account; and NARRATIVE with plot, which is less often chronological and more often arranged according to a principle determined by the nature of the plot and the type of story intended" (Holman and Harmon 1992, 308). The distinction between simple narratives and plot-driven narratives that C. Hugh Holman makes seems to parallel that of linguist William Labov who described narratives as being either fully-developed or minimal. His description of the former seems to be akin to the plot-driven narrative and the latter to the simple narrative. According to William Labov, the fully-developed narrative recalls past events and usually has six elements including a summary of events, an introduction to characters and setting, a summary of connecting events leading up to a climax, and an ending. However, a minimal narrative, a narrative which simply gets to the point rather than looking to the past, does not include all of the elements of the fully-

developed narrative. Other scholars have given new names to Labov's terms, calling the fully-developed narrative a "narrative" and the minimal narrative a "story" (Johnstone, 2001, 637-638). Unlike Holman and Labov, narrative theorist Gerard Genette points out that there are not different narrative orderings, but three different narrative components. He uses the term "story" to describe narrative content--that which is actually recounted. He calls this narrative text "the signified." He uses the term "narrative" to describe how and through what means the "story" is told, referring to "narrative," in this sense, as the "signifier." Finally, he uses the term "narrating" to describe the production of narratives: "I propose . . . to use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content . . . to use the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself, and to use the word *narrating* for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place" (1980, 27). It is Genette's use of the terms "story" and "narrative" that is most applicable to narrative as Labov speaks of it, that is, narrative in the sense, first, of what content—events—will make up the narrative and in the sense, second, of how those events will be ordered—with simple, minimal elements or with full plot development. The vital link between "narrative" and "story," as Genette defines the terms, becomes evident when one recognizes how the events are picked for inclusion in a narrative and then the way those events are ordered either to affirm an individual's humanity or to imply his inhumanity or inferiority.

Unlike the simple narrative with its minimal content and with its ordering of events solely around the present, a "real" or fully developed narrative reveals an individual's full humanity by showcasing the individual's present in light of his past. This accords with James Baldwin's insistence on serious unbiased fiction as truth telling. By contrast, according to

Roland Barthes, a simple narrative may not be a narrative at all. Barthes says that separating an event from its past, from its context, from the events that preceded it, is essentially to strip a narrative of what makes it a narrative and to make it merely an extensive elaboration upon an event rather than an actual narrative. This expresses at least an element of what Baldwin sees in newspaper and police reports and other limited and prejudicial expressions that demean and denigrate human lives. Narration is not only a recounting of a series of events; rather, it is also, according to Barthes, an expression of some past time. In fact, he says that the expression of past time, described by the French word "preterite," is foundational to any narrative, whether that narrative be recounted in a novel or in history (1996, 204). Genette seems to confirm this point, saying that an event first presented in a novel and the context which explains it and which actually came before it in time, is important to the narrative whole:

> . . .when a narrative segment begins with an indication like 'Three months earlier, . . .' we must take into account both that this scene comes *after* in the narrative, and that it is supposed to have come *before* in the story: each of these, or rather the relationship between them (of contrast or of dissonance) is basic to the narrative text, and suppressing this relationship by eliminating one of its members is only not sticking to the text, but is quite simply killing it. (1996, 35)

What Barthes points to as actual narration seems to be found in the plot-driven narrative. According to him, the expression of past time that serves as "the cornerstone of Narration" dictates that a narrative's events be causally related and that these events be ranked in order of importance, a "hierarchy of actions":

> The function of preterite is no longer that of tense. [. . .]. Through the preterite, the verb implicitly belongs with a causal chain, it partakes of a set of related and orientated actions, it functions as the algebraic sign of an intention. Allowing as it does an ambiguity between temporality and causality, it calls for a sequence of events, that is, for an intelligible Narrative. [. . .]. . . .the preterite is the expression of an order . . . .(1996, 204)

Barthes says that it is this ordering and ranking of events in narration that makes the reality fashioned by narrative events appear plausible. It is this ordering of events that keeps reality, as it appears in narratives, from becoming overwhelming because it is given meaning. This order lends legitimacy to the writer's work and allows society to be at peace with what the writer produces: "The narrative past is . . . a part of a security system for Belles-Lettres. Being the image of an order, it is one of those numerous formal pacts made between the writer and society for the justification of the former and the serenity of the latter" (1996, 204-05). Baldwin, I think, would agree, since Barthes' statement appears to valorize the serious, objective moralist's production of narratives that present a truth, as opposed to what we might call stereotypical social story telling that presents prejudiced, narrow, or simplistic versions of human events.

The Prophetic Mission of Baldwin's Fiction

For Baldwin, looking at the past, though, is more than giving society a sense of serenity. Rather, looking at the past—considering context—helps society to see the truth—the reality—of who people are. In this mindset, Baldwin is a prophet, a writing prophet, one who not only shows how social storytelling of various kinds creates distorted, prejudicial

images of individuals but one who also counters these distortions by creating truth-telling narratives that show the human reality of his characters.

In scripture, prophets are shown to have three functions. They serve as judges, foretell the future, and serve as teachers. According to Walter Kaiser, these teachers instruct people in "the oracles of God" and in "how to live and how to bring their lives into conformity with that revelation" (640). The prophet's major purpose for presenting prophesy, says Kaiser, is to teach:

> Biblical prophecy is more than 'fore-telling': two-thirds of its inscripturated form involves 'forth-telling,' that is, setting the truth, justice, mercy, and righteousness of God against the backdrop of every form of denial of the same. Thus, to speak prophetically was to speak boldly against every form of moral, ethical, political, economic, and religious disenfranchisement observed in a culture that was intent on building its own pyramid of values vis-à-vis God's established system of truth and ethics. (645)

The bold-speaking nature of a prophet is a trait that Baldwin claims for himself. Thus, it does not seem unusual that he identifies in some ways with Christ who was also considered a prophet, boldly teaching others the ways of God in the face of opposition (Kaiser 640). According to biographer David Leeming, Baldwin showed his identification with Christ when responding to his mother's concern over what she considered some of the improper language in his discourse:

> . . . [Baldwin] chided his mother warning her that his work took him beyond the limits of ordinary propriety, that real writers, like real prophets, could not be hemmed in by respectability. To illustrate his point he spoke to his

> mother's religious side, reminding her that Jesus himself had not in his day been considered respectable, that he had been regarded, in fact, as the 'very author of Profanity.' Like Jesus, he would rather die than be the victim of the 'doom called safety.'" (11)

Like a prophet, Baldwin asks that society look at the full context from the past in order to gain, as Russell Brooks says, an "unobstructed vision" of the present and of those, particularly the marginalized, who live in the present. According to Brooks, Baldwin speaks as does the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in calling upon society to look at 'former things' in order to gain an unobstructed vision (128).

Baldwin suggests that decontextualized storytelling, like news stories and police reports, may have the appearance of plausibility, but it is often false because it does not tell the whole story and does not see the humanity of some marginalized individuals. The true identity of this individual is hidden when he and the events surrounding him are discussed out of context. True identity is replaced by a stereotypical image. In America, where stereotypes of blacks and other minorities abound, Baldwin believed, as Brooks states, that before there could "be any clear thinking about minorities, then, Americans must find out what the American image hides." And, this is not possible "so long as [Americans] continue to make the black man invisible" (132). The notion that decontextualized narratives make the marginalized, particularly the black man, invisible is confirmed even by journalists, writers of the most common decontextualized narratives—news stories. In a 2003 radio interview about her *New York Times* best-selling book *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble and Coming of Age in the Bronx*, journalist Adrian LeBlanc recalled her 10 years of interviewing many poor residents of the Bronx, and, as a result, developing an intimacy with

many of them, an intimacy that she said helped her to know them and write about them in context, something that other journalists could not do because they encountered the residents only briefly to do quick news stories. She recalled one incident, involving a young boy in court for selling drugs, which illustrated how well she, compared with other journalists, knew and understood many of the residents:

> And he was wearing this button-up shirt that had huge dollar signs on it. And I knew, for all kinds of reasons that had to do with the length of time I'd been around and knowing him and knowing how he dressed, that that was his dressed-up shirt. But I was also—it was like a split frame because as a journalist, I'm saying, 'Oh, my goodness, here you are in front of a judge for a drug-dealing charge, and you're wearing a shirt with huge dollar signs.' Now if you're a daily newspaper reporter, what a detail, right? Like, 'Oh, flashy kid,' you know, 'completely disrespectful.' You could swing that detail in a million directions, right, none of which were actually true to the case of this young man, who, in fact, was absolutely trying to present his best front. And I thought what a blessing to know that. You—you just were constantly forced to back up your assumptions by the length of time. Like, 'Oh, boy, do I not know a thing.'

LeBlanc explains how this young boy and others with whom she had become acquainted in the Bronx would, in newspaper stories, be given the description "welfare mother" or "drug dealer," descriptions that did not identify who they were as people, that did not try to touch upon what motivated them or what life history they reflected. It is with such unfavorable images as "welfare mother" or "drug dealer" that decontextualized narratives imply the

innate inferiority of an individual and those who are like that individual in regard to color, race, gender, or economic status.

In the fictional societies of Baldwin's novels, decontextualized stories operate similarly, creating mythic images that hide the reality of who individuals are. These widely disseminated stories are deemed acceptable by society because they are approved by institutional structures. Yet, Baldwin uncovers the falsehood of such accounts by showing the complex humanity of the individuals who are their subjects.

In Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, the news story is the type of simple narrative that reinforces Giovanni's inferior status as an Italian in Paris. In *If Beale Street Could Talk* the police report is what establishes Fonny's inferiority as a black man in a racially segregated America. When Giovanni murders a bar owner named Guillaume and is later arrested and condemned to death, Parisian newspapers present a simple account that vilifies him, focusing exclusively on his crime, never considering why he committed it:

> [Giovanni's] face was on newsstands all over Paris. He looked young, bewildered, terrified, depraved; as though he could not believe that he, Giovanni, had come to this; [. . .] And it seemed, as it had seemed so many times, that he looked to me for help. The newsprint told the unforgiving world how Giovanni repented, cried for mercy, called on God, wept that he had not meant to do it. And told us, too, in delicious detail, *how* he had done it: but not why. Why was too black for the newsprint to carry and too deep for Giovanni to tell (1956, 145).

Similarly, in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, after Fonny is accused of a rape he did not commit, Police Officer Bell writes a police report which demonizes Fonny by excessively detailing

his supposed crime, making not even the slightest attempt to explain the events leading up to the rape, an explanation which may very well have revealed, or at least suggested, Fonny's innocence:

> Mrs. Victoria Rogers, nee Victoria Maria San Felipe Sanchez, declares that on the evening of March 5, between the hours of eleven and twelve, in the vestibule of her home, she was criminally assaulted by a man she now knows to have been Alonzo Hunt, and was used by the aforesaid Hunt in the most extreme and abominable sexual manner, forced to undergo the most unimaginable sexual perversions. (1956, 126)

Yet, Baldwin trumps the characterizations that the news stories present of Giovanni and that the police report gives of Fonny. While the French press causes Guillaume's name to become "fantastically entangled with French history, French honor, and French glory, and very nearly . . . a symbol of French manhood" (1956, 142), Baldwin shows through the first-person reliable narrator David how Guillaume was actually a sexual predator who, unbeknownst to the French public, tried to prey upon Giovanni, a young man who had left his family in Italy after becoming disillusioned by the death of his child. Destitute of family and friends, Giovanni goes to Guillaume seeking help. However, after meeting Guillaume's demands for sexual favors only to find that Guillaume reneges on his offer of help, Giovanni kills him out of frustration and despair. This truth, David points out, is one that the Parisian newspapers never know and report. David tells his fiancée that Guillaume was " 'just a disgusting old fairy.'" His fiancée responds, " 'Well, how in the world do you expect the people who read newspapers to know that? *If* that's what he was, I'm sure he didn't advertise it—and he must have moved in a pretty limited circle.'" David questions her,

asking " 'But isn't there some point in telling the truth?'" She acknowledges that the newspapers have another kind of truth: " 'They're telling the truth. He's a member of a very important family and he's been murdered. I know what *you* mean. There's another truth they're *not* telling. But newspapers never do, that's not what they're for'" (1956, 142). David's revelation of Guillaume's and Giovanni's true character serves as the truth, the gospel.

Even though the newspaper stories achieve great authority and Giovanni's characterization as a murderer seems to legitimize his eventual execution, a punishment disproportionate to his guilt, David's narrative testifies to Giovanni's humanity. Giovanni was not perfect, but neither was he wholly villainous. David reveals Giovanni as a naïve and disillusioned young man fighting to maintain some sense of personal dignity.

Personal dignity is also what Fonny in *If Beale Street Could Talk* wants, particularly since he is not guilty of the rape of which he has been accused. His girlfriend Tish, who is also the narrator of the novel, reveals that contrary to Officer Bell's police report, which implies a kind of bestiality on Fonny's part, Fonny's arrest and incarceration in no sense reflect the true character of Fonny. Officer Bell's racism and desire for revenge is the motive for the false reporting. Bell previously had tried to arrest Fonny when Fonny confronted a man who was sexually harassing Tish. Humiliated when Tish stands up for Fonny, Bell goes on a quest to find something to justify arresting Fonny. He trumps up false charges, demonizing Fonny in the police report, thereby allowing the criminal justice system to justify keeping him in jail. Tish's narrative stands as evidence of Fonny's humanity. Tish, the first person reliable narrator, provides facts that reveal Fonny is not the black male rapist as

outlined in the police report, but, rather, an innocent young artist who has been targeted by a racist police officer.

The stories that cast Fonny and Giovanni in an unfavorable light have the power to stand as truthful presentations of both men because of the ways that social institutions create and use information. In both the media and in law enforcement, the conventions of writing frequently produce decontextualized information. As a result, in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, the police report obviously provides no space to explain Officer Bell's racially motivated spying on Fonny long before Fonny's arrest. In *Giovanni's Room*, the news story omits Guillaume's exploitation of Giovanni long before Giovanni murders him. Thus, the news story quickly becomes a vehicle for talking about Giovanni in ways—negative ways—that fail to capture the complete truth of who he is. This flaw in news writing is explained well by journalist Susan Orlean, known for her 1998 bestselling nonfiction work entitled *The Orchard Thief*:

> I present myself, as a writer, as fallible, as subjective, not as an omniscient observer of the people I'm writing about. And part of that is because I've come to believe and understand that it is impossible to know someone thoroughly. We don't even know ourselves thoroughly. How could we possibly know someone that we spend a limited amount of time with? It's simply—it's absurd. And I think some of the artificiality and inauthenticity of modern celebrity journalism is all about that, in my opinion. It's spending an hour in a press situation and then writing a piece with the authority and the voice of someone pretending to know somebody well. It's just not possible. It's absurd. (3-4)

Just as the conventions of expository writing require focus and elaboration on one topic, the conventions of the police report and the news story frequently require focus and elaboration upon a single act—Fonny's alleged rape, Giovanni's act of murder.

The fact that the news story and the police report are allowed to stand as the truth, the truth of who Giovanni is and the truth of who Fonny is, may also be connected to new ways that society defines truth. According to Michel Foucault, truth in discourse has come to mean how well discourse adheres to certain theoretical principles (218-19). The conventions governing the gathering and presenting of information about news events and crime, when followed, make the news story and the police report themselves seem to society the very embodiment of truth. According to Foucault, even though textual products that adhere to a particular convention exclude or bar information, they are touted by institutions as being truth itself:

> But this will to truth, like other systems of exclusion, relies on institutional support: it is both reinforced and accompanied by whole strata of practices such as pedagogy—naturally—the book-system, publishing, libraries . . . . But it is probably even more profoundly accompanied by the manner in which knowledge is employed in a society, the way in which it is exploited, divided, and in some ways, attributed. (1972, 219)

This honest and opening shaping of knowledge, Baldwin suggests, can achieve a higher truth, a truth not wrapped in social convention by reporting the motivations of those who stand as the subjects of discourse. Thus, for Baldwin, the truthfulness of Officer Bell's police report is not found in how well the report adheres to the conventions of police reporting but in what motivates Bell to include certain information in his report. Baldwin shows Bell's

motivations to be racist; Bell applies the principles of police reporting in a racist way. According to Donald Gibson, Baldwin saw the "racism inherent in the functioning of institutions [as] the expression of racism in the hearts of individuals" (1981, 118). So, in the case of Officer Bell, his racist police report merely expresses the racist proclivities within his heart.

Baldwin reveals that simple narratives, like news and police reports, are not alone in suggesting the inhumanity and, thus, inferiority of certain individuals. Plot-driven narratives also produce such results when the contexts they provide are actually pretexts. Unlike a simple narrative that focuses on a single event in isolation, a plot-driven narrative frames a single event within the larger context of events that proceeded it. As a result, an individual who serves as the subject of the narrative is not judged based on his choices made during a single event. Rather, he is judged based on what preceding events say regarding why he made a certain choice during a particular event. In other words, to use the example cited earlier from Adrian LeBlanc, a plot-driven narrative can explain why a character who was brought to court on drug charges chose, during a court proceeding, to wear a shirt with huge dollar signs, not merely record that he wore such a shirt. However, in some of Baldwin's novels, his characters create plot-driven stories based on pretexts in order to proclaim superiority over those who serve as the subjects of their accounts. In other words, they tell stories that provide false explanations of why others behave as they do in certain circumstances. Such is the case in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and in *Just Above My Head.* Similar to the way in which Giovanni and Fonny are cast as inferior by internal, stereotypical stories so too are John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Jimmy and Arthur in *Just Above My*

Head. However, in the case of John and Jimmy, supposed inferiority is framed, not in formally written social narratives, but in unwritten plot-driven stories bearing a pretext.

For John, the account pointing to his inferiority is a story that his stepfather Gabriel tells himself as an internal monologue. Narrative theorist Hillis Miller says that personal, internal storytelling is a common practice in life as it is in fiction: "As adults, we hear, read, see, and tell stories all day long—for example, in the newspaper, on television, in encounters with co-workers or family members. In a continuous silent internal activity, we tell stories to ourselves all day long" (1995, 66). In fact, by definition, "narrative" does not necessarily assume the solid form of a formal, written text, such as a police report or newspaper report. As Genette explains, the common definition of the term "narrative" opens it up to include the telling of a series of causally-related events regardless of whether or not the telling is through some formal, written medium. "Narrative," according to Genette, is commonly used to describe "oral and written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events . . ." (1980, 25). However, Genette says a second definition of the term opens the definition of "narrative" even further, suggesting that it can refer to the telling of a series of casually-related events regardless of whether or not that telling involves a linguistic medium:

> A second meaning, less widespread but current today among analysts and theoreticians of narrative content, has *narrative* refer to the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc. 'Analysis of narrative' in this sense means the study of a totality of actions and situations taken in themselves, without regard to the medium, linguistic or other, through which knowledge of that totality comes to us: an example would be the adventures

> experienced by Ulysses from the fall of Troy to his arrival on Calypso's island. (1980, 26)

The totality of actions—the narrative--that Gabriel recalls in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* results in his coming to a couple of absurd conclusions: that he is the Lord's anointed and that his stepson John, the child of his second wife, Elizabeth, is a "bastard" child and a child whose faith, like that of his mother, is false. As far as Gabriel is concerned, both John and Elizabeth are worthy of his "righteous wrath," or rather, his physical and verbal abuse. After all, as he rationalizes, Elizabeth had a child by a man with whom she was never married, and John stands as living evidence of her past sinful behavior. Gabriel's characterization of John and Elizabeth is undone, however, by the omniscient narrator of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* who reveals that Gabriel's assessment of John and Elizabeth is really rooted in personal guilt. Gabriel is a man burdened with the guilt of an adulterous affair for which he has never publicly repented, an affair that produced a child he never really acknowledged. In order to build up his own self-worth, he belittles Elizabeth and John, particularly John. Yet, as the narrator shows, John is actually sincere in his faith, as evidenced by his salvation experience at the end of the novel.

Like John who, in Gabriel's narrative is labeled an "interloper among the saints" (1953, 115), Jimmy in *Just Above My Head* is framed as a rebel. In his case, the family story says that he is jealous of his sister's ministerial calling. The narrative in which this image of him is projected is told by both his sister Julia and his parents. In their conversation with the Montana family, they recount the narrative of Julia who as a seven year old, they say, came up to her mother in the kitchen one morning and said that the Lord had called her to preach. When her father came in from work that day, he said that he could feel that something was

different in the house. He started to laugh because he felt so good. The very next Sunday, Julia started preaching. From that point on, according to the parents, her special status as the Lord's anointed made her the envy of her brother, requiring that he be constantly rebuked for misbehavior rooted in his jealousy toward his sister (1953, 63-78). However, Hall, the novel's first-person narrator, tells a different narrative and confirms his suspicions that, in the case of Julia, "somebody was jiving the public" (1978, 64). According to his narrative, Julia claims that she has been called to preach in hope of gaining attention and keeping the family together. For a while, this scheme works; her lying brings immediate advantages. The family increases wealth, a great incentive for Julia's father Joel remaining with the family, and Joel dotes on Julia while neglecting his wife and son Jimmy. However, when Julia's mother dies, the falsehood of Julia's ministerial calling and the conditional nature of her father's love are revealed. Hall's narrative reverses the image of Jimmy. No longer is Jimmy the jealous brother; rather, he is revealed to be a young boy frustrated by recognizing his sister's falsehood but unable to do anything about it. The first person narrator Hall shows that contrary to the story that Julia's parents like to tell about her brother Jimmy being jealous, Jimmy is actually a little boy understandably ill-equipped to deal with his neglectful parents, parents mesmerized by his lying sister.

While Hall's narrative trumps the family account told by Julia and her parents, it also stands in opposition to the news stories in the British and American press concerning the death of Hall's brother, Arthur. While stereotypes in these stories do not play a major role in influencing what happens to Arthur as do the accounts in *Giovanni's Room* that help justify Giovanni's execution or the account in *If Beale Street Could Talk* that results in Fonny's unjust incarceration, these simplistic stories do present an image of Arthur that Hall's version

corrects. The British press reports on Arthur's death in the basement of a London pub, describing him as a "nearly forgotten Negro moaner and groaner," and the American press describes Arthur as an 'emotion-filled' gospel singer who died at 39. Hall's narrative, by contrast, explains how and why Arthur died, a death that resulted from Arthur's isolation, and identifies the lost brother as the sincere but exiled keeper of a musical tradition. Arthur's imposed isolation drives him away from Hall and others in his life who could affirm his humanity. In this isolation, he internalizes the rejection he receives from those whose disapproval of his homosexuality requires them to reject him. Feeling unwanted and alone, Arthur drinks himself to death. He is not a moaner or a groaner—a journalistic description of what a more informed speaker would identify as a singer of blues and gospel music. Rather, he is a talented young man who succumbs to fear and loneliness.

For Baldwin, stories that are used to dehumanize, whether the narratives are plot-driven or simple, rest on the same assumption—that one revealed act of wrongdoing or supposed wrongdoing serves an unknowing society as evidence of an individual's inhumanity. Thus, Giovanni's murder of the abusive Guillaume, Fonny's alleged act of rape, John's out-of-wedlock birth, and Jimmy's frustrated moments with Julia's deceit automatically mark each of them as villains, though villains only in the false accounts of others. In *Just Above My Head*, Arthur dies tragically in the basement of a London pub, though no obvious dehumanizing account is told about him while he is alive. Yet, there is implicit evidence that one exists. Arthur's tragic end resulted from his being rejected by those whom he wanted his soulful music to serve. According to Lynn Scott, "Arthur, like Baldwin, is the gifted singer-artist whose song is an expression of his love. Like Baldwin, Arthur comes under criticism for his homosexuality by those he most wishes to represent"

(1978, 128). This criticism implies the existence of a more complexly false account within the faith community from which Arthur comes. It erroneously rests on the assumption that obvious, visible wrongdoing or sin, as defined in an interpretation of scripture, serves as evidence of an individual's inhumanity and unworthiness. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* Gabriel's view of John rests on this assumption, and it allows him to assume a moral high ground, despite never publicly acknowledging his own affair and the illegitimate son that came from that affair. He condemns the "sin" of his second wife Elizabeth who, in not abandoning a son conceived outside of marriage, actually exhibits moral superiority to Gabriel. In *Just Above My Head,* the criticism that Arthur receives suggests that an unwritten story has been created that condemns him because of his homosexual relationship with Jimmy. Jimmy speaks of this to Hall after Arthur's death: "Even when people started talking about us, the way they did, you remember, I really did not give a shit. I was hurt. But I will tell Great God Almighty, baby: I was in love with *your* brother. It's only since he left us, and I've been so alone and so unhappy, that all the other *moral* shit, what the world calls moral, started [bothering me]" (1978, 575). Jimmy's comments here suggest that, for Jimmy and Arthur, their greatest concern with the narrative being told about them was not so much the specifics of what was said but, rather, just the fact that something was said at all. This is not to suggest, though, that the narrative was unimportant. In fact, according to Genette, to emphasize the narrative act is to necessarily care about narrative content:

> Without a narrating act, therefore, there is no statement, and sometimes even no narrative content. So it is surprising that until now the theory of narrative has been so little concerned with the problems of narrative enunciating, concentrating almost all of its attention on the statement and its contents, as

> though it were completely secondary, for example, that the adventures of Ulysses should be recounted sometimes by Homer and sometimes by Ulysses himself. (1980, 26)

Jimmy suggests that Arthur's demise was rooted, not so much in what was said about him and Arthur, but in who said it—those in the faith community, the community that Arthur loved, from which his musical talent came and for which his musical talent existed. It is Hall's narrative of Arthur that reveals to the reader Arthur's innate human worth and thus the importance of acknowledging his humanity even if disagreeing with his lifestyle. Sadly, after being condemned by his faith community, Arthur has what little of his humanity that is publicly recognized finished off by the secular community when the British and American press characterize him wholly by his tragic end and not by his musical gifts.

Conclusion

Narratives ideally help human beings examine what it means to be human. Narrative ordering is particularly important in this examination because narratives that order events with some sense of the past tend to come closer to revealing the complex nature of the human personality. Baldwin takes the stance of a prophet, a truth-teller in equating such narratives with truth, saying that arriving at the truth of who an individual is, the truth of his humanity, requires a careful look at former things, at all that led the individual to some present moment. He lamented the tendency in society to speak against human equality and to dehumanize individuals, especially those on the margins of society by portraying their individual and cultural pasts without full reference. Baldwin's novels dramatize a battle between narrative texts that tell the truth about characters and texts that falsely imply the inhumanity of characters by failing to investigate the fullness of their lives. These battling texts are found

in Baldwin's novels. On one side of the battle line are the simplified and false accounts within the fictional societies of his novels. This we might call an element of Baldwin's prophetic voice—a truth-telling narrator who sees through the simplifications of a hypocritical and self-satisfied society that fails to recognize the humanity of society's marginalized. In presenting these marginalized individuals as human beings, Baldwin proclaims "the truth" about who they are. As one who proclaims truth, Baldwin takes on a prophetic, Christ-like role.

In John 14:6, Christ identifies himself as the embodiment of truth. He tells his disciple Thomas, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." According to theologian Millard Erickson, "Jesus clearly understood himself to be a prophet, for when his ministry in Nazareth was not received, he said, " 'A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house' (Matt. 13:57)" (239). As a prophet, one of Christ's roles was to proclaim and to live out the truth of God. Erickson says that Christ "spoke the divine word of truth. Beyond that, however, he was the truth and he was God, and so what he did was a showing forth, not merely a telling, of the truth and of the reality of God" (240). The truth that Christ spoke was meant to set believers free spirituality, was meant to free them from worldviews established in opposition to God (Silva 271).

Baldwin, in his role as a truth-telling narrator, also frees individuals—his readers. It is to them that he proclaims the truth about the marginalized. Because of this truth, his readers are loosed psychologically from a worldview which frames society's marginalized as being subhuman. While his readers are being freed, so too are his characters when they begin interacting with family and friends and, through that interaction, come to see their human worth.

Chapter III

Beauty from Ashes: Redemptive Suffering in James Baldwin's Fiction

In his string of stirring novels, James Baldwin shows dramatically how false witness, outright lies, and gossip often promote and justify oppression in various forms, be it the false incarceration of an innocent man or the physical and verbal abuse of a teenage boy by his self-righteous father. Baldwin's fiction suggests that such oppression—this crushing of an individual's mind, body, and soul—leads to suffering, suffering which can be so destructive that it causes an individual to lose sight of his humanity. However, as spoken of so often in the African-American faith tradition, suffering has the power to be redemptive rather than destructive when the sufferer grabs hold of his humanity—that is, when the sufferer, through what some would call an encounter with God and what others might term a moment of spiritual clarity, sees his humanity in spite of the pain and manifests a sense of innate worth by serving others, helping them to live in, and to live out, their humanity. In Baldwin's novels, this encounter with God, this moment of spiritual clarity is experienced by John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), David in *Giovanni's Room* (1956), Fonny in *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and Julia in *Just Above My Head* (1979). After their spiritual encounter, these characters reveal the authenticity of their redemption, reveal how they have truly accepted their innate humanity when they reach out to serve others, particularly other sufferers, reminding them of their humanity. While suffering becomes redemptive for some of Baldwin's characters, such is not the case for Arthur, the gospel singer in *Just Above My Head*. He is never able to claim the humanity that his suffering works to strip from him; thus, he dies broken-hearted, the potential he had of serving his community through his music becoming lost.

Suffering Characters in Baldwin's Novels

Baldwin's characters experience suffering upon suffering: the suffering that comes from being thought inferior and, thus, treated unjustly and then the suffering that springs from their accepting that inferior labeling. In the latter situation, the characters become their own oppressors. Speaking to that point, Baldwin says, "You know, it's not the world that [is] my oppressor, because what the world does to you, if the world does it to you long enough and effectively enough, you begin to do to yourself. You become a collaborator, an accomplice of your own murderers, because you believe the same things they do" (*A Dialogue*, 1973, 17).

For John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, suffering comes at the hands of his stepfather Gabriel who despises him, and for a moment, John internalizes his stepfather's negative attitude about him. John's stepfather Gabriel, the head Deacon at the church called the Temple of the Fire Baptized, does not see the laws of God as guiding principles which show believers how to serve one another—how to love their neighbors as themselves— but as codes of condemnation that locate and punish supposed fault. According to Michael Lynch, "In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin indicts the black fundamentalist church for its image of a vengeful, unforgiving God and for the consequent deforming effects on its members whose entrapment in guilt and fear prevents them from loving themselves or others" ("Just Above," 1978, 287-88). Even when no fault truly exists, Gabriel invents one in order that he can condemn John while standing proud in his own self-righteousness. Donald Gibson describes Gabriel as a "religious man steeped in hatred, narrowness, and self-righteousness; he is sadistic and inordinately authoritarian" (1953, 100). Gabriel's belief in John's inferiority is revealed in the fact that Gabriel considers John a "bastard" child, abuses him,

and calls him "ugly." This explains why John, in his dream world, is "beautiful, tall, and popular" (1953, 19). The connection that Gabriel makes between human worth and physical appearance is a common one among those wishing to claim moral superiority over those they wish to dehumanize. As theologian Howard Thurman points out,

> [During times of war] the enemy nation is defined as comprised of subhuman beasts, brutes, savages; [as a result] we are free to inflict pain without a violent pang of conscience. During the war with Japan I saw billboards in California showing Japanese men as monsters with huge grotesque faces, large buck teeth, enlarged black-rimmed glasses—in short, they were not human beings at all. To destroy them would be a righteousness, or at least decent, act. (2002, 213)

Gabriel declares war upon the adolescent John, assaulting his sense of self-worth, and John begins to internalize these feelings, questioning the genuineness of his own faith and his ability to attain a promising future. In church, John looks at the other "saints" for whom faith is "the very bread of life" (15) and considers what he believes to be his wickedness—his ill-will toward his minister stepfather, an ill-will often extended to God: "John's heart was hardened against the Lord. His father was God's minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father. On his refusal to do this had his life depended, and John's secret heart had flourished in its wickedness until the day his sin first overtook him" (1953, 21). Outside of the church, John's sense of inferiority deepens as he considers his family's poverty and the impact it will have upon him in the future. As Craig Werner points out, John desires to eat good food, wear nice clothes, and go to the movies as much as he wishes, but "reality punctures his dream and

he realizes that for him, the future is more likely to include a cramped Harlem apartment and a menial job" (2000, 82).

Like John, Fonny of *If Beale Street Could Talk* suffers deeply, but not from ill-treatment by his father. Rather, his suffering comes from his false arrest by a racist, vengeful police officer, an arrest that leaves him feeling like a caged animal instead of a man. Fonny's first encounter with Officer Bell occurs when Fonny and his girlfriend Tish are shopping at a vegetable stand. When Fonny returns to the stand after having stepped away for a moment, he spots an Italian man sexually harassing Tish and knocks the man to the ground. Almost immediately, Officer Bell, the neighborhood's white police officer, is ready to arrest Fonny for assault. However, Fonny's arrest is thwarted when the owner of the vegetable stand admonishes Officer Bell for seeking to arrest Fonny while allowing the harasser to go unpunished. Bell is humiliated by this admonishment and from that time, irrationally seeks revenge against Fonny. He finds an outlet for his revenge when a rape is committed and he is able to persuade the victim to accuse Fonny of the crime. In jail, Fonny must live in circumstances that violate his very humanity:

> [Fonny] rises, and walks to the corner, and pees. The toilet does not work very well, soon it will overflow. He does not know what he can do about it. He is afraid, up here, alone. [. . .]. He stares through the small opening in the cell door into what he can see of the corridor. Everything is still and silent. It must be very early. He wonders if today is the day he will be taken to the showers. But he does not know what day it is, he cannot remember how long ago it was that he was taken to the showers. I'll ask somebody today, he thinks, and then I'll remember. I've got to make myself remember. I can't let

> myself go like this. He tries to remember everything he has ever read about life in prison. He can remember nothing. His mind is as empty as a shell; rings, like a shell, with a meaningless sound, no questions, no answers, nothing. And he stinks. He yawns again, he scratches himself, he shivers, with a mighty effort he stifles a scream, grabs the bars of the high window and looks up into what he can see of the sky. (1974, 193)

When his girlfriend Tish goes to visit him in jail and offers him hope by explaining that his lawyer will try to demonstrate that Officer Bell is a racist, pointing to Bell's unjust killing of a young black boy in the past, Fonny's response reveals the sense of hopelessness that his suffering has bred: "Shit. If the jury knows that, they'll probably want to give him a medal. He's keeping the streets safe" (1974,197). As feelings of hopelessness engulf him, Fonny begs Tish to help him escape his suffering: "You want me to die in here? You know what's going on in here? You know what's going on in here? You know what's happening to me, to *me*, to *me*, in *here*? . . . Get me out of here, baby. Get me out of here. Please" (1974, 119).

Though he feels like a caged animal, Fonny is at least buttressed by his friendship with Tish, but in *Giovanni's Room*, the title character has no such support from his supposed friend David. When David eventually abandons Giovanni, Giovanni seeks friendships among those who only misuse him. However, he becomes so frustrated and hopeless by this misuse that he commits murder in a moment of rage and is eventually executed. Because of Giovanni's execution, David lapses into a state of guilt-induced suffering, knowing that his abandonment of Giovanni led to Giovanni's downfall.

David begins his so-called friendship with Giovanni quite disingenuously. While he claims Giovanni as a friend, his actions suggest otherwise. Feeling uneasy about his homosexuality, David loathes himself and transfers those feelings to Giovanni, eventually rejecting Giovanni and leaving him vulnerable to the dark side of Parisian society. As Kent points out:

> Giovanni's life demands David's love as its only hope for transcendence. Irresponsibly, and in a way that denies [Giovanni's] complexity as [a] human . . . David disappoints the hopes of Giovanni . . . [. . .]. The homosexual's problem is shown to be the threat of being forced into the underworld, where bought love of the body, without transcendence, is simply productive of desperation. (1977, 25-6)

When Giovanni's vulnerability leads him to murder, a murder ultimately resulting in his execution, David confronts for the first time his own wretchedness, seeing how his dismissal of Giovanni indirectly led to Giovanni's fate. In his guilt and sorrow, David feels beyond forgiveness, saying to himself, as he knows Giovanni's execution is soon approaching, "I repent now—for all the good it does—one particular lie among the many lies I've told, told, lived, and believed" (11).

Very much like David, Julia in *Just Above My Head* witnesses the return of suffering that she in part caused, suffering that tears at her sense of being a young woman, that undermines her sense of being human. As a seven-year-old, Julia had claimed to be called of God to preach. This claim results in her younger brother Jimmy being neglected and labeled jealous and obstreperous while she herself is fashioned into a child religious superstar, receiving all of her parents' attention. This attention, though, begins to turn sour when her

mother on her deathbed tells the fourteen-year-old Julia that she has come to realize the falsehood of Julia's ministerial claims: "The Lord ain't pleased with you. He going to make [you and your father] to know it. How come you think you can fool the Lord? You might done had *me* fooled. But I *wanted* to be fooled! How come you think the Lord don't see? When *I* see!" (1978, 167). As Julia's mother predicts, the Lord does make Julia and her father to know that He is not pleased. Julia and her father both suffer, but Julia's suffering seems particularly intense. Her once-doting father, a father who had never tried to discipline her, begins to sexually assault her regularly, angry that she refuses to return to the pulpit and make money for the household. She has realized, however, that her call to the ministry was a lie told to win attention, and she comes to understand the effect this lie has had on her brother and on her own life.

Redemptive Suffering in the African-American Faith Tradition

Julia and other characters in Baldwin's novels seemed trapped in tragic suffering; however, in reflecting a concept common in the African-American faith tradition, Baldwin ultimately makes the suffering of these characters redemptive for both themselves and for others, a point of view he did not arrive at alone.

According to Anthony Pinn, some African-American clergy beginning in the twentieth century began to argue that the suffering of African Americans had been redemptive—that is, that suffering had developed the personal character of African Americans as a people, helping them to be more sensitive to the pains of others. In this view, African Americans were seen as a chosen people, or rather, suffering servants. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s views were tied to this idea, the idea that the suffering, which African Americans had endured unjustly could develop personal character and effect cultural change.

Today, says Pinn, "Even some [clergy], like Joseph Washington and Albert Cleage, who disagree with King's [nonviolent] strategy embrace the idea of redemptive suffering" (*Moral Evil*, 2002, 12). In describing the potential of suffering to be redemptive, to develop an individual's character, theologian and civil rights advocate Howard Thurman says that "openings are made in a life by suffering that are not made in any other way. Serious questions are raised and primary answers come forth. Insights are reached concerning aspects of life that were hidden and obscure before the assault" (2002, 238). For suffering to be redemptive has not meant, however, that suffering in and of itself is good, particularly since it is seen as the result either of someone's own impropriety or someone's impropriety toward another. According to Martin Luther King, Jr., "'Suffering itself is not redemptive nor is it ordained by God; rather, it is contrary to Christian principles of unity and proper behavior' " (Pinn, *Why Lord*, 1995, 76).

Yet, theologian James Cone points out that, traditionally, suffering has been a positive, character-building, redemptive force within the African-American community because it has propelled individuals to fight for their freedom, and this fight has also been one aimed at reclaiming and affirming their humanity. According to Cone, freedom within the African-American faith tradition has been seen as a God-given gift, a gift allowing individuals to make choices that enhance their lives and the lives of those around them. Believers accepted by faith that through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ, God won their freedom. However, because of the fallen state of the world, a world in which humanity generally fights against freedom, in which some people regularly insist upon dehumanizing others and thereby justifying attempts to control them, to restrict their ability to make life-enhancing choices, the privilege of claiming and living in that freedom requires

a struggle. Suffering, however, notified the sufferer that a theft was occurring, that someone was attempting to steal the God-given gift of freedom. Knowledge of this theft required a fight, a struggle, a confrontation with the thief. For the African American faith community from which James Baldwin came, the willingness to fight for freedom was a hopeful fight, for by faith people believed that freedom was already theirs since God obtained it in Christ. Their theology told them that Christ died and experienced bondage in the grave, but that God raised Him from the dead, freed Him from death. Because of this, believers viewed the struggle for freedom as an act of fighting for what was already theirs, a struggle that had no outcome but to be successful. Resurrection day would indeed arrive. After all, it was not as if they were fighting for something that was not theirs and so had to live with an uncertain hope, as if trying to pull off a great heist. According to Cone, freedom, including the idea of innate human worth contained in that concept, was theirs by faith:

> in the experience of the cross and resurrection, we know not only that black suffering is wrong but that it has been overcome by Jesus Christ. This faith in Jesus' victory over suffering is a once-for-all event of liberation. [. . .]. . . . What is the decisive event of liberation? We respond: Jesus Christ! He is our Alpha and Omega, the one who died on the cross and was resurrected that we might be free to struggle for the affirmation of black humanity. [. . .]. . . . for the blacks during slavery and its aftermath, Jesus was not a clever theological device to escape difficulties inherent in suffering. He was the one who lived with them in suffering and thereby gave them the courage and the strength to 'hold out to the end.'

> The idea that Jesus made blacks passive is simply a misreading of the black religious experience. He was God's active presence in their lives, helping them to know that they were not created for bondage but for freedom. Therefore, through sermon, prayer, and song black people expressed visions of freedom in a situation of servitude. When everything else in their experience said that they were nobodies, Jesus entered their experience as a friend and a helper of the weak and helpless. His presence in the black experience was the decisive liberating event which bestowed dignity upon them. (2002, 294)

According to Cone and other theologians, the ability of suffering historically to affirm the humanity of blacks was possible because the concept of human worth was understood in spiritual rather than political terms. This fact may appear ironic, considering, as sociologists Martin and Martin suggest, that spirituality was used to justify black suffering:

> Even though they were forced to listen to religious instruction designed to make them content with slavery, the slaves worshipped God in their own way when they stole away at night and worshipped in their own 'invisible' churches. The worship of God became an important aspect of the psychological and spiritual survival of the slaves. It gave them a sense of personal significance and worth in a world in which they were defined not as human beings but as property. The belief that God recognized them as equals to whites, that God recognized each of them personally as one of his children, and, more important, that God was on their side served as powerful medicine for sick souls and frustrated hopes. The belief that although the slave master

> might be more powerful than the slave, he was not more powerful than their God gave slaves a feeling of psychological and spiritual advantage over the slave master. (1985, 28)

In the African-American faith tradition, human affirmation that a sufferer found in God was not merely about the individual believing in his or her human worth. Rather, it urged individuals living out this belief to serve others, thereby affirming their human worth even more because this was an imitation of Christ. Thus, throughout history, picture after picture arises of black sufferers who, once obtaining their own freedom—that ability to make life choices that affirm their humanity—worked to serve others. For instance, Sojourner Truth in the 1800s eventually sprung forth into service, becoming an abolitionist and woman's right advocate after having, years earlier, what she called an encounter with Christ wherein she said He revealed to her that He had not meant for any person to be enslaved to another (*This Far By Faith*, 2003). According to Martin and Martin, "If . . . religious and race-conscious blacks such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman did not feel that God was on their side, protecting them as they carried out His will in the battle against powerful and murderous odds, it is hardly likely that they would have pressed forward with such strength, courage, and audacity" (1985, 39). Even into the twentieth century, as evidenced by the civil rights movement, suffering viewed through faith became a call to service, to live out one's redemption. As James Cone says, "The civil rights movement [was] the church going into the world, transforming the world and being transformed" oneself (*This Far by Faith*, 2003). Thus, this faith-based movement was not merely about blacks gaining political rights but, rather, also about their gaining personal freedom for the purpose of serving each other and society in a greater capacity.

The Suffering that Saves Baldwin's Characters

The redemptive power that many in the African-American faith tradition attribute to suffering is also evident in the life of many of Baldwin's characters. Their lives testify to the truth of what the narrator in Baldwin's novel *Just Above My Head* says, "I learned that anguish was necessary, and however crushing, could be used—that it was there to be used" (1978, 384). For Baldwin's characters, their suffering becomes redemptive when, through an encounter with God or a moment of "spiritual" clarity, they recognize the truth—the innate human worth of all people, including themselves. Seeing their humanity during moments of suffering prompts them either to serve others or to embrace a mindset conducive to serving in the future. In serving, they become instrumental in helping other sufferers recognize their innate human worth. According to Michael Lynch, ". . .the potential of suffering for the transformation and sanctification of the individual and of others is central to Baldwin's spirituality . . ." ("Just Above," 1978, 297). Baldwin believed, as Clarence Hardy notes, in "the redemptive possibilities of suffering" (2003, 46). He ascribed great honor to sufferers, calling them "improbable aristocrats," particularly those young blacks who, with non-violent resistance during the civil rights movement, suffered as they faced mobs protesting their entrance into public schools and universities. Hardy says, "In describing an improbable aristocracy of suffering and struggle, Baldwin's rendering runs parallel to how suffering has shaped black religion's evolution in the United States. Black religion's emphasis on suffering begins with suffering figures from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament" (2003, 47).

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, John stands as the improbable aristocrat, an aristocrat whose suffering becomes redemptive when he encounters God during his salvation experience. Living with a stepfather who abuses him, labeling him ugly and rejecting him in

favor of a biological son, John learns to loathe himself. Yet, during his conversion experience, the Holy Spirit transforms that self-loathing into the blessed reassurance that he has human worth, that he is an heir of salvation, a purchase of God.

In John's conversion experience, he falls out under the power of the Spirit during worship one evening. In this state, the weighty feeling of his self-loathing anxieties grows so intense that he feels as though he might be in the darkness of hell, a darkness "full of demons" (1953, 199). Yet, above that darkness, he begins to hear the singing of the saints. It is as if their voices represent light, truth. Eventually, one of those saints, Elisha, speaks, asking John as John still lies on the floor if he is yet saved and then extending his hand to John. John rises, answering Elisha, "Yes, oh, yes!" (1953, 208). His adolescent anxieties and his self-loathing have fled before the power of the Holy Spirit. Now he knows he is somebody, for His Father God has accepted him, has made him worthy. John exclaims, "I'm going to pray God . . . to keep me, and make me strong . . .to stand . . . to stand against the enemy . . .and against everything and everybody . . . that wants to cut down my soul" (1953, 207). John embraces this salvation for it allows him to be freed from the notion that he is, as his stepfather Gabriel calls him, a "bastard" child, someone of no value and worth. The fact that God has accepted John into the fold testifies to John's value and worth. God loved him enough to bring him into the family of believers. According to Gibson, in Baldwin's novel "John is the force of love, Gabriel of evil. The plot affirms the victory of love over evil and its working out the winding of historical necessity" (1981, 101). Though evil in the world, in the form of oppression, touts the inferiority of some individuals, causing them to suffer dehumanization, those, like John, are able always to triumph over evil, that is, come out of

this suffering with a vision of self worth and with the potential to affirm the humanity of others.

Like John, Fonny in *If Beale Street Could Talk* also comes out of his suffering with a renewed vision of his self-worth, a vision he had lost briefly when he was unfairly jailed, not only made to live like an animal in a jail cell which reeked of urine but also forced to go days without showering. Though Fonny begins to feel like the beast that the justice system implies that he is, Fonny's father and his friends remind him of his humanity. They serve as his salvation, giving him a clear vision of his human worth.

Though frustrated initially at the false arrest and the unwillingness of officials to release him, Fonny eventually begins to see how his father, his girlfriend Tish, and her family are working diligently to serve him, to help him in many ways, particularly in paying fees for his lawyer: His father Frank and Tish's father Joseph work overtime to help him; Ernestine, Tish's sister, takes a part-time job; and Tish's mother, Sharon, goes to Puerto Rico to find the woman who falsely accused Fonny of rape in hopes of getting the woman to retract her statement (1974, 138-39). These efforts by Tish's family reflect Christian love in action, according to Gibson:

> [Tish's family] functions as a small community based on its members' mutual love, support, respect, and understanding. Pooling their meager economic resources, they expend endless energy doing whatever is necessary to keep the family intact and to protect its members from a hostile and constantly threatening social environment. They are the true Christians as opposed to those [like Fonny's mother and sisters], who merely participate in the weekly rituals of institution. The Hunt women [Fonny's mother and sisters] are

> preoccupied with form and appearance and give little regard to true emotion, especially love. The Rivers [Tish's] family, in contrast, do not merely profess righteousness, they live it through the daily expression of love, through constantly caring for one another. (1974, 120)

As Fonny watches Tish's family and his father serve him, he embraces his humanity, an embrace made evident by his adoption of a new purpose in life, a purpose which will transform him from an artist to a servant-artist, or, as he says, from an artist to an artisan:

> Listen, I'll soon be out. I'm coming home because I'm glad I came, can you dig that? . . . *Now,* I'm an artisan. Like a cat who makes—tables. I don't like the word artist. Maybe I never did. . . . I know what it's about now. I think I really do. Even if I go under. But I don't think I will. Now. . . . Baby. Baby. Baby. I love you. And I'm going to build us a table and a whole lot of folks going to be eating off it for a long, *long* time to come. (1974, 208-09)

In pointing to table-making as the supreme act of his artisanship, Fonny—and Baldwin—seem in some ways to allude to Psalm 23:5 wherein the Psalmist David says, "[God] preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies." This table that Fonny and David speak of is a place of protection, a place where one is with those who care, who remind the individual of his humanity and worth. At this table, one is away from a harsh world full of enemies who wish to dehumanize. At this table, one fellowships with family and friends, as Christ did with his disciples during the Last Supper, before going out into a world bent on crucifying kings and saving thieves.

Fonny's new attitude about his artistry—his artisanship—comes to reflect what Baldwin himself believed—that artistry was more about responsibility and obligation than

pursuing one's own pleasures and desires: "The artist is not free to do what he wants to do; the artist is free to do what he has to do" (*A Dialogue*, 1973, 75). Fonny's vision of self-worth is genuine, for it arises without Fonny having any idea when or if he will be released from jail. Even as he remains jailed indefinitely, he comes to know he is a man and not an animal. As a man, and not an animal, Fonny is more keenly aware of the humanity of others. Thus, he quite naturally casts himself as a servant, as one who will build a table upon which all will eat. In realizing his humanity, in realizing the humanity of others, Fonny has come to find redemption in his suffering. Thus, he will not suffer the fate that so many young people who grew up with him did, young people, as Tish recalls, who never survived the assaults against their humanity: "though people died early in many different ways, the death itself was very simple and the cause was simple, too: as simple as a plague: the kids had been told that they weren't worth shit and everything they saw around them proved it. They struggled, they struggled, but they fell, like flies, and they congregated on the garbage heaps of their lives, like flies" (1974, 39). Because Fonny's suffering has become redemptive, not only for himself, but also for others, Fonny becomes, as Houston Baker says, a messiah-like figure who will "provide the substance of a new life" for others ("Embattled Craftsman," 1988, 76).

However, even more than Fonny, Giovanni in *Giovanni's Room* stands as a messiah-like figure, for his suffering leads to his actual death, a death that becomes redemptive for his friend David. Ironically, Giovanni had spent most of his life running from death, from suffering. Before coming to Paris, Giovanni had lived in Italy with his wife. Though they had a child, the infant was stillborn. This tragedy, along with other tragedies in Giovanni's life, like the death of his father, prompts Giovanni to disavow his faith and flee to Paris,

abandoning his wife and his mother. Giovanni recalls the incident that led to his move to Paris:

> Yes, I had made a baby but it was born dead. It was all grey and twisted when I saw it and it made no sound—and we spanked it on the buttocks and we sprinkled it with holy water and we prayed but it never made a sound, it was dead. [. . .]. When I knew that it was dead I took our crucifix off the wall and I spat on it and I threw it on the floor and my mother and my girl screamed and I went out. We buried it right away, the next day, and then I left my village and I came to this city where surely God has punished me for all my sins and for spitting on His holy Son, and where I will surely die. (1956,132-33)

In fleeing to Paris, Giovanni had been merely trying to escape death and suffering. What he learns, though, is that suffering is everywhere, even in Paris. In his trying to flee, the opportunity of helping other sufferers is lost to Giovanni. However, when Giovanni is placed in a situation where he cannot escape his own suffering, he is finally able to help someone—David.

In the guilt-induced suffering that David experiences after he realizes that his rejection of Giovanni led, in part, to Giovanni's poor choices and eventual execution, David is forced to look at himself, to see his own hypocrisy. Shaken and humbled by what he sees in himself, David decides never to treat another individual's feelings trivially. "People," he says, "are too various to be treated so lightly" (1956, 11). The value that he learns to see in other people suggests that he has come also to embrace his own self worth. Therefore, despite his remorse over Giovanni's death, David is not left, as Leslie Fiedler suggests, "to a

life of degradation and self-reproach" (1956,147). Because David knows that he and all people have human worth, he now has the potential to reach out to others in charity. David develops the potential to serve because, in death, Giovanni serves him. When David receives insight into himself as a result of Giovanni's execution, all of Giovanni's past suffering, suffering that could have been redemptive for him had he not run from it, passes on to David. Thus, ultimately, the relationship between David and Giovanni becomes a story, not about the complications of a homosexual relationship, but about the need for individuals to show due regard for the humanity, concerns, and needs of others. Michael Lynch emphasizes how the latter point was of most importance to Baldwin:

> Though often attacked as preaching sexual immorality and libertinism in his work, Baldwin does celebrate sexuality of whatever orientation but always subordinates its expression to the ethic of respecting and loving the other as oneself. Although he has been incorrectly regarded as variously both a puritan and a profligate, Baldwin actually argues for a paradoxical secular asceticism whose highest values are selflessness and sacrifice. ("Just Above," 1997, 292)

The life of selflessness and sacrifice is one that Julia in *Just Above My Head* adopts, demonstrating her newfound, healthy sense of human worth. Julia's problem, unlike that of Baldwin's other characters, had not been that she felt inferior, but rather, that she felt superior, deifying herself, claiming, as a child preacher, that whatever she said or wanted was divinely inspired. However, as Eleanor Traylor argues, when Julia steps away from the pulpit, she engages in a "slow recreation of herself" (1988, 220). She drops her notions of superiority and embraces her humanity, obeying the command that her mother issued on her

deathbed: ". . .don't forget you got a brother. That's how you'll get the Lord's forgiveness" (1978, 167). Though her father's regular sexual assault of her threatens to reverse her high-mindedness, making her feel wretched, her mother's deathbed instructions actually carry with them the assumption that Julia is capable of serving, of helping another human being and that, therefore, Julia possesses innate human worth.

Julia's life comes to illustrate that an individual's ability to serve others, that is, to be actively and productively engaged in a life that enhances the lives of others, is a key indicator of his humanity, is a key indicator that the individual has recognized, at least subconsciously, his or her humanity. This connection between productive service and the expression of one's humanity, as seen in Julia's life later in *Just Above My Head*, is established earlier in the novel through the character Arthur. Though Arthur ultimately experiences circumstances that blind him to his humanity, he first appears in the novel as one who possesses a strong sense of self-worth. This is especially evident early in his gospel career when he spends a highly productive period in Canada, moving daily from one Gospel performance to the next, being able to do little more than take care of his basic needs. When he returns to his home in New York, his brother notices the positive effect that this period of full engagement in life has had upon Arthur and says of him, "Arthur came in from Canada with his nappy-headed self. He had been very successful in Canada, and very happy—one of the reasons that he was so nappy-headed: he hadn't had time to do more than wash or comb his hair" (369). Arthur's high degree of productivity is not possible for those who have come to believe in their inferiority. Baldwin suggests that individuals who are considered by society to be "worthless human being[s]" are also thought to be incapable of being productive, of aspiring

to excellence. Only those who reject society's labeling of them as worthless can lead productive lives, aspiring to great and lofty things ("My Dungeon Shook" 335).

Julia is one who rejects her father's implicit assessment of her as worthless. Though her father regularly abuses her, she knows that she is not an object existing merely for the displacement of his fears and anxieties. Thus, she aims to fulfill in a lofty way her mother's deathbed request that she not forget her brother Jimmy. After her mother passes, her brother Jimmy is sent to New Orleans to live with his grandmother because of the constant antagonism between him and his father. In Jimmy's absence, Julia begins working after school as a scrubwoman, hoping to earn enough money to travel to New Orleans, bring Jimmy back to New York, find an apartment for him, and care for him herself. She talks to Florence "Mama" Montana about her goal, and Mama Montana, who is a friend of Julia's grandmother, tells Julia that the goal is too lofty, particularly considering that Julia is only an adolescent: "But Julia . . .you ain't but fourteen, you can't take care of your*self*, how you think you going to be able to take care of Jimmy?" (252). Despite this well-meaning admonition, Julia demonstrates a firm belief in her human capability by insisting that she will continue to pursue her goal and so fulfill her mother's last command. She tells Mama Montana, "I promised my mother I would [take care of Jimmy]. She didn't want him to go down South, and she didn't want him nowhere near his daddy, neither. [. . .]. I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I *have* to do it, I promised my mother!" (252).

In establishing a goal and seeking to fulfill it, Julia stands in contrast to her father Joel who possesses an impoverished sense of his own humanity, of his own human capability. In fact, Joel's self-debasing attitude makes Julia's assumption of human worth all the more evident. During Julia's preaching days, Joel appeared quite self-assured. He was described as

a “zoot-suited stud of studs” who had “the world in a jug and the stopper in his lean brown hand” (64). He acted more like Julia’s “entertainment” manager than her father, traveling with her from one preaching event to the next, having made her a collapsible platform upon which to stand when preaching. This platform, which was always placed behind the pulpit, “looked like a wooden box, with a rope handle. When her father opened it, with his boyish flourish, the box became a handrail, sometimes painted gold. This contraption, and her father, traveled with Julia everywhere: and made Julia’s appearance in the pulpit seem mystical, as though she were being lifted up” (63). When Julia preached, her father sat in the front row. During Julia’s reading of scripture, which preceded the preaching, her father always stood up even when his wife and the rest of the congregation remained seated. Yet, after Julia’s mother dies and Julia decides to leave the pulpit, Joel’s true feelings of human inadequacy and worthlessness surface as he become unhealthily dependent upon Julia emotionally and financially. One evening when she comes home and finds him waiting for her, she reflects on how his inordinate dependence upon her makes her feel trapped and burdened:

> It was Sunday night. He would go out. She hoped he would go out and pick up some woman and never come back. He would go out. He would come back drunk. He would fall into bed, smothering her with his breath; his tears would burn her face. [. . .]. With all her heart, she wanted to flee—she could not move. [. . .].
>
> She had a job scrubbing floors after school, and she gave him almost all the money that she made, which wasn’t much. He had had to pawn his favorite

> pair of cufflinks. She was sitting still, watching everything crumble, and disappear; and yet, she knew she had to move (238).

When Joel confronts Julia and tells her, "You all I got," she becomes resentful at his looking solely to her to save the household from poverty, particularly since she is doing all that she can to sustain him and herself: "If I'm all you got,' she said, 'you in a mighty sorry condition. I ain't got nothing." Despite her resentment, he persists in placing the burden of his well being upon her: 'But you in a position to *get* something. And you know you are. Are you just going to sit here and let us be overtaken?" (238).

In looking to Julia as a provider, Joel reveals how blind he is to his own humanity and to the inherent sense of capability implied in being human. He mirrors Frank, the character from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Frank's belief in his inability to be a productive human being is apparent in how he responds to his wife Florence one day when, after he comes home having mismanaged his paycheck yet again, she angrily says to him, "I thought I married a man with some get up and go to him, who didn't just want to stay on the bottom all his life!" Frank says to her "And what you want me to do, Florence? You want me to turn white?" (86). In associating human capability with whiteness and in connecting non-productivity with blackness, Frank reveals a self-dehumanizing attitude. In *Just Above My Head*, Joel's remarks to Julia are similarly self-dehumanizing. When Julia assures him that she does not plan to let the household be overtaken with poverty, he asks her, "What you going to do, then?" (238). In his question, he reveals that, despite his abuse of Julia, treating Julia as a worthless object, he actually considers himself the worthless and incapable one, one who spends his life getting drunk, moving in and out of relationships, and eventually disappearing from the lives of Julia and her brother.

However, because Julia accepts her human capability, her life becomes highly productive, a productivity that transforms her into a repairer of breaches, into one who reconciles with her brother, serving and nurturing him. This reconciliation is precipitated by the way difficulties between Julia and her father climax one morning. Her father's frustrations over her unwillingness to return to the pulpit and restore lucrative earnings to the household as well as his ever-growing possessiveness of her as a love-lust interest explode into uncontrollable rage. He beats her so severely that she must be hospitalized. The extent both of Julia's beating that morning and Julia's abuse prior to that beating are described by Florence Montana, the one Julia called immediately after Joel fled the scene of the beating:

> [Julia] had been beaten to an inch of her life. Her face, it wasn't no face, it was just a mess of blood and puffed-up flesh. Didn't have no lips, didn't have no eyes—just little dark slits where the eyes was supposed to be. I said, 'Who did this?' I thought somebody had broke in and tried to rob them. And she never answered me, she just kept saying, 'I've lost my baby, I know I've lost my baby.' [. . .]. I said again, 'Who did this? And [some neighbors] said, 'Her father. Her father beat her, and he gave her that baby, too.' (302)

After a period of hospitalization, Julia is taken to New Orleans to live with her grandmother, and while there, she and Jimmy reconcile. One day he enters the bedroom where she is recuperating and begins small talk. As if sensing her dejection, he tells her, 'Hey, tell you something. I dig having you for a sister. You dig having me for a brother?" (360). In accepting this overture of reconciliation, Julia begins a close-knit relationship with her brother that enables her to serve him, fulfilling the promise she made to her mother.

Evidence of this service to her brother begins when Julia, having fully recuperated, attends a Mardi Gras festival with Jimmy and a few of his friends. During the festival, some New York photographers notice Julia dressed in festive costumes, and they hire her as a model. Soon after, Julia leaves her grandmother's home, moving to New York and carrying Jimmy with her (350). She finds a loft apartment large enough for the both of them, and as she works as a model, she supports Jimmy in his efforts to be an artist-activist. When her old friend Hall visits her and asks about Jimmy, she speaks of Jimmy in a way that reveals both her intimate awareness of his efforts and goals and her genuine interest in him:

> Jimmy don't go no place where there's no piano. He'd take his piano to the bathroom with him, if he could. Damn near drove our grandmamma around the bend . . . . That poor lady! She *still* don't know what she did to deserve it all. But, . . . she dealt with it, I'll give her that. Imagine she might be getting some sleep, finally, now that we out of the house. Jimmy's trying to be a musician, but it's tough. Of course. He spends a lot of his time on the road, in the South, playing for Civil Rights benefits, and . . . because of that, of course, he's spent some time in jail. It's a madhouse down there now, and it's going to be worse up here. (351)

Julia's intimate awareness of her brother goes beyond her knowing the details of his career, though. In serving her brother, Julia develops a kind of motherly instinct, an eyes-in-the-back-of-her-head sensitivity, that allows her to detect Jimmy's presence or absence without audible or visible evidence of such and that allows her, in that detection, to assess the general nature of his welfare, his welfare determining to a large extent her degree of

contentment and happiness. Hall notices this about Julia one night when he returns with her to her loft apartment after a dinner date:

> [Julia] opened the door very quietly and switched on the light. The wide, long loft was utterly still; but Julia listened for a moment before she threw her handbag on the sofa. 'Ah, Jimmy's home." She grinned. 'Let's have a drink.' I sat down. I wondered, then I didn't wonder, how she knew Jimmy was home. The first bedroom door was closed: perhaps it would have been open if he were not at home. But it wasn't, on the other hand, a matter of signals, not a code to be deciphered, broken—she knew, simply, that he was home because she would certainly have known if he wasn't. She was behind me, at the bar. I felt, in her curious tranquility, menaced, as I feared, or confirmed, as I hoped, by my presence, that she knew Jimmy was home because, otherwise, *she* would not be home, would not peacefully be preparing two drinks. (367)

Julia's desire to maintain this close-knit relationship with her brother and to stay attuned to his needs is evident in the way she prioritizes her relationship with him even over and above her relationship with Hall. She seems to view her loft apartment as a kind of sacred place reserved for her and Jimmy, a place wherein their already strong sibling relationship can be nurtured. Thus, in her first date with Hall, she decides against allowing Hall to stay overnight. She says that until she has an opportunity to speak with Jimmy about the budding romantic relationship between her and Hall, she does not feel it appropriate to suddenly bring a new person-presence into the sacred place that belongs to her and Jimmy alone. In explaining this to Hall, she says, "I don't want Jimmy to *find* out [about us]. [. . .]. I just want to tell him, myself. I think that's fair—okay?"(368).

The positive effect of Julia's service to Jimmy is especially evident to Arthur, Jimmy's childhood acquaintance and the younger brother of Hall. When Arthur goes with Hall to Julia's loft, he is surprised to see that Jimmy is living with Julia and that Jimmy has changed in much grander ways than anyone expected:

> Jimmy had been Child Evangelist Julia Miller's sullen, and somewhat scrappy younger brother, who didn't get along too well in the household where everyone was so busy kissing Sister Julia's ass that they only noticed him when he got between them and Sister Julia's butt, and then, they just pushed him out of the way, and went on smacking. It was assumed, with all that, that he'd certainly turn out 'bad,' there didn't seem to be any other way he *could* turn out. Arthur, like everyone else, had only a dim idea of where [Jimmy] was [as an adult], no idea at all of what he was doing, and no one, really, ever expected to see Jimmy again [after he moved to New Orleans]. That we did was due entirely to Julia, as Arthur had very quickly divined, but this did not prepare him for Jimmy. For he found Jimmy funny, brave, and terribly moving. (465)

Jimmy becomes, at 37 years old, a pianist and writer who says, "Some days, I don't know if I'm trying to write a book, or trying to write a symphony" (520).

The Suffering that Destroys Baldwin's Characters

While Julia's service to her brother Jimmy enables him to embrace his human worth, Jimmy's friend Arthur, though experiencing a strong sense of human worth early in his gospel-singing career, gradually loses sight of his value as a human being. This loss begins when he responds to personal suffering by seeking comfort in isolation but finds, instead, a

painful loneliness. His brother's limited ability to help him in this loneliness and his own fears about being judged harshly because of his romantic relationship with Jimmy leave him deeply sorrowful, a sorrow that leads to his death and that reveals his suffering to be a destructive rather than a redeeming force in his life.

One of Arthur's first experiences with suffering, occurs when he, his brother Hall, and his childhood friend and piano accompanist "Peanut" go on tour down South to participate in a series of freedom rallies. A few hours before one of these rallies when Arthur, Hall, and Peanut are walking down a street in Atlanta, a group of men confront them and ask, "Why don't you northern niggers stay up North?" (434). Shortly after that, a fight ensues and Arthur ends up with a split upper lip. Still, Arthur manages to sing at that night's freedom rally, a rally in which men, very much like those who hit him earlier, stand threateningly near the church where the rally is being held. When the rally is over and rally participants are headed home, Peanut slips out to the church's outhouse. However, when he never returns, a massive search for him begins in and around the church grounds and later, throughout the state of Georgia. As Hall says, "We put ads in papers, we ransacked Georgia; but we never saw Peanut again" (452). With Peanut presumed to have been kidnapped and killed, Arthur and Hall are eventually forced to return to New York without him. Hall takes a job in advertising while Arthur begins singing abroad, sending Hall postcards occasionally. In one of his postcards, he tells Hall: "It's lonely . . . out here . . . but maybe that's the best way for it to be. Can't nobody hurt you if they can't get close to you. [. . .]. Love must be the rarest, most precious thing on earth, brother, where is it hiding?" (453). Arthur's fear of being hurt reveals how intensely Peanut's disappearance has affected him. He learns through the experience with Peanut just how vicious the world can be; he learns just how willing

some are to destroy those whom they deem to be worthless. To protect oneself from hurt and suffering, Arthur feels that an individual must remain distant, alone, isolated. Hall recognizes the flaw in Arthur's thinking. In reflecting upon Arthur's stay in Paris, Hall says, "[Arthur] rather regrets his solitude, and wishes he had someone to eat with, someone with whom to share the city. He wishes that I were there, but he needs someone else more than he needs me, he needs a friend. He needs someone to be with, needs someone to be with him" (459). Despite Arthur's attempts to retreat from a vicious world that can cause suffering, Hall knows that Arthur needs companionship, not isolation.

Though Hall knows this, he is still limited in his ability to help Arthur. Hall is, without question, a loving brother, serving Arthur by managing his gospel-singing career and worrying over Arthur's physical well being, as he did the night that Peanut was discovered missing and a massive search for him began on church grounds. When the search had been exhausted and Arthur had not returned, Hall had become so worried that he began screaming Arthur's name, fearing that Arthur, like Peanut, had disappeared: "I yelled, 'Arthur! Come back! Come back!' [. . .]. I was suddenly certain that Arthur, too, had been swallowed up, and I screamed his name again, again, and again until I saw him come loping toward me. He looked into my face, and put his hand on my arm—we were both trembling" (449).

Yet, despite his loving concern for his brother, Hall lives a conventional life which prevents him from realizing that he needs to play a greater role in helping pull Arthur out of his prison of isolation. According to Lynn Scott, "Hall had been Arthur's protector and promoter. At the same time Hall received a sense of vicarious pleasure in Arthur's [singing], there was a limit to what he wished to know of his brother's private life, of the suffering that produced the song. Hall's more conventional life had kept him 'outside' the danger, passion,

happiness, and sorrow of his brother's experience" (2002, 132). Hall develops a more conventional life as an advertising man when he and Arthur finally return to New York after Peanut's disappearance in Georgia. As an advertiser, Hall's life becomes conventional because he works within society's established reality, even while he quietly despises this reality:

> I could never, at bottom, take advertising seriously. [. . .]. [It] made reality, or the truth of life, unbearable, threatening, and, at least, above all, unreal . . . . The music of the commercial simply reiterates the incredible glories of this great land, and one learns, through advertising, that it is, therefore, absolutely forbidden to the American people to be gloomy, private, tense, possessed; to stink, even a little, at any time; to grow gray, to wrinkle, to be sexless; to have unsmiling children; to be lusterless of eye, hair, or teeth; to be flabby of breast, belly, or bottom; to be gloomy, to know despair, or to embark on any adventure whatever without the corroboration of the friendly mob. [. . .]. [If] my attitude toward advertising as concerned the great, white faceless mass was, at best, ironic, my attitude toward advertising as concerned black people was very painfully ambivalent. I felt that black people had a sense of reality far more solid and arresting than the bubble-gum context in which we operated . . .
>
> But who was I, anyway, to *have* an attitude? I was doing the same thing, in the same office, and for the same reason: we had to eat. And we were expected to be aware, too, that the presence of blacks in advertising was a major sociological breakthrough. Was it? for our breakthroughs seemed to

> occur only on those levels where we were most speedily expendable and most easily manipulated. And a 'breakthrough' to what? I was beginning to be wary of these breakthroughs, was not certain that I wanted a lifetime pass to Disneyland. On the other hand, here we were, and you can't have your cake and eat it, too: we would simply have to find a way to use, and survive and transcend this present breakthrough the same way we survived so many others. (454-55)

In believing in another reality, a reality other than the one he peddles, Hall is not required to be an agitator. He is not required to change society, to turn it upside down. Instead, he can live in quiet, unseen defiance. As a result, he does not have to worry as much as Arthur about being attacked by a vicious world that might oppose him. Arthur, on the other hand, cannot live in unseen defiance. First of all, he is a public figure and, thus, his life is open before many. Secondly, as a homosexual, his lifestyle is obviously, visibly unconventional. Thus, he has greater reason to fear suffering harm at the hands of those who oppose him. Hall does not realize the intensity of Arthur's fears. Therefore, even though he senses Arthur's loneliness and the connection this loneliness has to Arthur's concerns about being judged harshly because of his homosexuality, Hall thinks that it is enough to sit and wait for Arthur to open up about his anxieties: "I knew what Arthur was worried about, and I wish I could talk to him about it. I wanted to say, *Dig it, man, whatever your life is, it's perfectly all right with me. I just want you to be happy. Can you dig that?* But that's a little hard to say, if your brother hasn't given you an opening. [. . .]. Arthur was worried about another man's judgment; in this case, mine" (379-80). According to Scott, "Hall's silence . . . is related to his discomfort with his brother's homosexuality. Hall's discomfort exists in

spite of, or perhaps because of, Hall's intense adoration of and devotion to Arthur" (2002, 135).

Despite his discomfort, Hall bears, for two distinct reasons, the responsibility of initiating a dialogue with Arthur. First, Arthur's intense fears make it impossible for Arthur to initiate a dialogue. Secondly, Hall is the older brother. Baldwin seems to place always upon the older sibling, particularly the older brother, the burden of keeping a difficult subject open for discussion. For instance, in his short story "Sonny's Blues" (1965), the older brother fails initially to sit down and listen to the troubles of his younger brother Sonny who is eventually arrested in a drug raid. However, after this older brother experiences the sudden death of his two-year-old daughter Grace and is left unable to share his grief with his usual sounding board—his wife Isabel who is herself grief-stricken—he realizes how important it is to listen to stories of pain and woe. His troubles, as he says, made Sonny's troubles real. When Sonny is released from jail, he goes with him to the club, listening to Sonny's song of woe, hearing Sonny play the blues, hoping this time to help keep Sonny's suffering from pushing him toward drugs and possibly ending up in jail again. In *Just Above My Head*, because Hall never really asks to hear Arthur's "blues," Arthur feels unable to share his concerns with him or with anyone, including his devoted but younger friend Jimmy.

At first, there is no need for Arthur to open up to Jimmy about his fears since Arthur temporarily overcomes his loneliness and isolation in what becomes a 14-year relationship with Jimmy, who serves as his piano accompanist after Peanut disappears. Hall admits that "Jimmy made Arthur happy," that Arthur's estimation of himself was altered because Arthur knew Jimmy loved him (557). However, as Arthur's fame increases, Arthur becomes uncomfortable with their romantic relationship, fearing the judgment of those who might

oppose it. Hall notices Arthur's slight discomfort and remarks on the way that Arthur, though not hiding the relationship, is less forthright about it than Jimmy: "Arthur was twenty-five, and Jimmy was twenty-one. Twenty-one is a cunning, carnivorous, but far from devious age. Neither Arthur nor Jimmy could ever really hide anything, nor did they ever, it must be said, when the chips were down, try: but Arthur was far more veiled, especially, of course, in his relation to Jimmy, around me" (559). Jimmy, being younger than Arthur, does not fully understand, until after Arthur's death, how tormenting the fear of judgment had been for Arthur:

> "It's only since [Arthur] left us, and I've been so alone and so unhappy, that all the other *moral* shit, what the world calls morals started [worrying me]. Like, why are you like this instead of like that? Well, how . . . am I supposed to know? I know this: the question wouldn't even come up if I wasn't so alone, and so scared, wouldn't come, I mean, in my own mind. I'm scared, and I'd like to be safe, and nobody likes being despised. And quiet as it's kept, you can't bear for anyone you love to be despised. I can't break faith with Arthur, I can't ride and hide away somewhere, and treat my love, and let the world treat my love, like shit. I really cannot do that. And the world doesn't have any morality. Look at the world. What the world calls morality is nothing but the dream of safety. [. . .]. The only way to know that you are safe is to see somebody else in danger—otherwise you can't be sure you're safe" (575).

Arthur, in fearing the judgment of others, begins to feel, as Hall says, that though he had been happy with Jimmy, "happiness is not his right, that he has no right to be happy"

(572). He becomes increasingly sorrowful, drowning his sorrows in alcohol and drugs. His death in the men's room in the basement of a London pub is only, on the surface, an adverse physical reaction to too much alcohol. Carson suggests that Arthur suffocates from "his inability to reconcile his homosexuality with his 'calling' as a gospel singer" (2000, 226). Traylor describes Arthur's demise as a "slow dissolution" in which Arthur's attempt "to harmonize his sacred song with the cacophony of his secular life finally breaks his willing but unequal heart" (1988, 221). Even more than a dissolution, Arthur's death might be described as an explosion of sorrow, an explosion being inevitable when, as Peanut had once said, an individual keeps sorrow trapped inside (1978, 429). When he explodes in sorrow, his suffering shows itself to be destructive, having blinded him to his innate human worth.

Conclusion

Long before Arthur's demise, when Arthur believed in his own human worth, he had worked alongside those who fought for the right of every human being to be regarded as valuable. He sang, for instance, at a freedom rally once in Richmond, Virginia, where Mrs. Reed, the rally's presiding officer, had stood up and told rally participants, "We're here raising money to get our children off the chain gang, and out of prison. We're here to let *everybody* know that every human being was born to be free!" (1978, 402). What Mrs. Reed means by freedom is clarified by one of the rally's speakers, a white preacher and freedom fighter from Tennessee named Reverend Williams when he says, "We're here to get something so simple nobody believes it. To get respect for our labor, respect for each other's lives" (403). Rev. Williams suggests that being free means being able to live and labor unhindered.

Such freedom seems nearly impossible to obtain, though, in a world that aims to destroy an individual's very sense of human worth, oppressing him, fighting against his efforts to live and labor to his fullest potential. If there by any doubt concerning the world's viciousness, concerning the way the world dehumanizes individuals, Baldwin suggests that one has only to look at Arthur's friend "Peanut." His disappearance—his presumed kidnapping and murder—at a freedom rally, no less— reveals the lengths some will go to dehumanize others. In his disappearance and in his name, Peanut symbolizes the oppressed. His formal name is Alexander Theophilus Brown, a name bespeaking dignity and honor, a name written in "florid handwriting" upon his green notebook, the only trace of him found after his disappearance (449). Yet, despite the honor suggested by his name, he is, by the world's standards, a peanut, one of little value. Not all the oppressed are murdered as he is, but they do suffer various types of dehumanization. The only way of protecting themselves against internalizing this dehumanization, even as they are suffering debasement, is to remember their human worth and to live out that remembrance by serving others. In this way, their suffering becomes redemptive. Arthur in *Just Above My Head* is not able to do this. He internalizes the world's debasement, and he dies. However, other characters in Baldwin's novels are able to grasp their human worth.

Yet, for many of these suffering characters, coming to believe in their human worth is a long process. Once John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Fonny in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and Julia in *Just Above My Head* go through that process and discover their innate humanity, they are able to serve their families and their communities, or at least become poised to do so. Though suffering characters such as Giovanni never come to any sense of self worth, they often indirectly lead others to such a revelation, thereby proving the beautiful

potential of suffering. It is this beauty, as Baldwin suggests, that has been granted in particular to African Americans, considering their history in America:

> This past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect . . .—this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, a human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority and that is unshakable. ("Down at the Cross," 1967, 376)

Chapter IV

James Baldwin's Call to Service: Christian Spirituality in African-American Literature

When James Baldwin dramatizes that a suffering individual's willingness to serve others gives him or her the power to counteract the dehumanizing effects of oppression, he reveals how Christianity can be used to understand the nature of spirituality, not only in his literary works, but also in the works of other African-American writers, particularly those who have followed him in the literary canon. This may seem ironic considering that since the nineteenth century, African-American writers have gradually moved away from Christianity, criticizing the way in which it has been a force in either condoning or ignoring oppression. Some critics have credited Baldwin with freeing later African-American writers from any concern with Christianity, a freeing that seemed to occur also in the larger African-American community outside the literary establishment. The seeming abandonment of Judeo-Christianity by the black literary establishment and by some in the larger African-American community has resulted in discussions of spirituality that frame it solely within the supernatural or within religious worship. However, in calling for society's oppressed to serve, to care for the needs of others who are oppressed and needy, Baldwin actually follows Judeo-Christianity in defining spirituality more holistically, reflecting how the black masses have historically understood and practiced spirituality and how they currently do so. And, in prizing service apart from the Christian faith wherein he learned about service, Baldwin still

points the way to understanding how Christian spirituality manifests itself in the works of contemporary African-American writers.

The Gradual Separation between Black Literary Works and Christianity

The late 1960s represented the black writer's complete rejection of Christianity after years of complex involvement with the faith, according to Doris Grumbach, writing in the 1970s. Grumbach says that in the nineteenth century, black writers such as Frederick Douglass looked beyond the image of God as fashioned by the white church, an image which identified God as having created superior and inferior races, and they embraced, instead, a view which pointed to a loving God, void of partiality. However, in the early twentieth century, W.E.B. DuBois, Countee Cullen, and other black writers no longer assumed the loving nature of God. They questioned His concern for the black race even as they acknowledged the black church's influence on black life. Later, in the 1930s, while black writers such as Langston Hughes also recognized the black church's influence, they suggested that the church's ideology, with its emphasis upon a better life in heaven while ignoring hardships on earth and equating earthly pleasures with sin, kept blacks in ideological bondage. Then, among writers such as Richard Wright during the age of realism and modernism from 1940 to 1960, the idea that God could be trusted was attacked, the figure of the minister was criticized, and believers were viewed as misguided. By the 1960s, according to Grumbach, virtually no relationship existed between the black writer and Christianity:

> To the black writer [of the 1960s], Christianity is a repressive and dangerous white-man's land. No longer serving, as it once did, the outcast black as

> valuable, sustaining, visionary experience, it is now seen to be delusive in nature (but no longer deluding), degrading because it is a denial, in the [racial depiction] of its central figures, of black selfhood, the cause of black spiritual and psychic sickness, sexually misleading in that it offers confusing images to black minds. (1971, 210)

In a 1998 review of *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, Philip Ryken, like Grumbach, discusses the ways in which African-American literary artists gradually abandoned Christian origins. As evidence of these origins, Ryken turned to Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" published in 1773. He notes how Wheatley discussed the issue of race in a biblical context: ". . .the poet and her readers were steeped in the Christian worldview. This made it possible to communicate the biblical truth about racial reconciliation through poetry" ("It Causes Me"). However, unlike Wheatley, according to Ryken, contemporary African-American literary artists as well as contemporary artists in general, no longer embrace such a worldview:

> The strong Christian element in African-American literature has gradually disappeared. The wealth of biblical allusions and theological reasoning in the old slave literature of David Walker and Frederick Douglass has been squandered. Although there are redemptive themes in the work of major contemporary writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, black literature has lost its distinctively Christian vision. Thus the history of African-American letters is one chapter in a story of the long, slow decline of Christian influence on American culture. This same decline can be traced in American literature in general. ("It Causes Me")

Critic Sondra O'Neale says that James Baldwin was a pivotal figure in this declining relationship between the black writer and Christianity because of his views regarding the black church and because of his endorsement of alternative lifestyles:

> [Baldwin] may be considered the first black American writer to distance himself from the lone enduring black institution, the black church, not by its notable absence (as with Wright, Ellison, and other blacks writing in the first half of this century; for example, Ann Petry, Nella Larsen, Sterling Brown, Chester Himes, Paule Marshall, Robert Hayden, and William Demby), but by his overtly persistent portrayal of its lack of authentic Christian commitment. In this and his subsequent treatment of homosexuality as an acceptable form of human love (in *Giovanni's Room* and, most recently, in *Just Above My Head*)—a position he knew was not compatible with orthodox Christian behavior and thus utterly shocking even to black sophisticates—Baldwin opened the floodgate for contemporary anti-Christian, nonbiblically based black American literature. In most of his works, he only questions divine existence while still courting its allegiance, but his boldness invited younger writers to complete the schism between black art and black faith. (140)

Like O'Neale, Clarence Hardy credits Baldwin with fathering the break between black art and faith: "In Baldwin's wake, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Octavia Butler, and other black women writers and others would create literary works where people are not defined by their ties to Christian concerns and themes" (2003, 44). Trudier Harris said that after Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Christianity would no longer stand prominently in African-American

literary works. According to Harris, "Representations of religious experience by black American writers of the 1970s and 1980s, following the impact of the Black Arts Movement and the tenets of the Black Aesthetic, would be transformed dramatically" (Introduction, 1996, 21).

Multiple Religious Choices within Black Culture

The decline of a Christian presence in African-American literature is reflective of a slight movement among African Americans who, beginning at the end of the civil rights era, began exploring other faith traditions. According to Quinton Dixie, during the decade of the late sixties, younger blacks began exploring religious traditions other than Christianity, traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, traditions that black writers such as bell hooks and Alice Walker embrace today:

> At the end of the 1960s, faith among black people was as vibrant as ever. But questions about the relevance of Christianity to the black experience in America were being voiced more loudly than in the past.
>
> The Vietnam War added to the rush of questions about Christian life. Black soldiers returned home with Buddhist prayer beads on their wrists. The American peace movement also brought black people in touch with Eastern faith traditions and expanded the range of possibilities for those in search for new beginnings.
>
> Hinduism and Buddhism became new alternatives on the black religious landscape. The fact that these faith traditions did not carry the history of racism against blacks made them all the more appealing to those seeking a way out of Christianity's tangled racial and economic cast system. This did

> not mean there were no racists practicing these religions, but it did mean that the teaching and sacred texts themselves did not imply that blackness was a curse. (2003, 284-85)[1]

In addition to embracing Buddhism and Hinduism during the 1960s, some African Americans were introduced also to Santeria and Vodou, the old religions of newly-arrived black peoples from Cuba and Haiti. According to Albert Raboteau, these religions, formed during Cuban and Haitian slavery and practiced at one time by Africans enslaved under European powers, spread in America to black and Hispanic communities. Followers of these religions believed that spirits controlled all aspects of life, and followers celebrated the victories of these spirits through a style of song and dance that came from Western and Central Africa. It was thought that these spirits could help individuals in times of difficulties and that believers could embody spirits, establishing a connection between human beings and the divine. According to Raboteau, ". . . Santeria and Vodou maintained a view of life as personal and relational in the midst of the impersonality of modern-day society in the United States" (2001, 27). In addition to Santeria and Vodou, many blacks in the 1960s, with a greater concern for their pure African roots, began converting to African-based religions such as Yoruba. Raboteau suggests, though, that the interest among African Americans in religions other than Christianity seemed to actually begin even before the 1960s. During the time of the great migration of the 1920s and 1930s, many blacks arriving in the North were introduced both to Christianity outside of Protestantism and to faiths other than Christianity:

> Accustomed to deciding between Baptist, Methodist, and perhaps Holiness-Pentecostal churches back home, migrants to the cities encountered black Jews, black Muslims, black Catholics, black Spiritualists (people who

> believed that the living could communicate with the dead), and black disciples of charismatic religious figures like Daddy Grace, the founder of a church called the Universal House of Prayer for All People, who believed that their leaders could exercise divine power to heal their problems in this world as well as the next. (2001, 86)

In the 1930s, Elijah Muhammed established the Black Muslim sect known as the Nation of Islam, rejecting Christianity as "the religion of the oppressor" ("Elijah Muhammed" 96).[2] Today, the Nation of Islam, a rapidly expanding religious organization, is finding a swift increase in African-American membership. And, another group, The Nations of God and Earth, which grew out of the Nation of Islam and which focuses on individuals finding God within themselves, is attracting followers among many young African-Americans living in urban areas (Dixie, 2003, 286-87). Many African Americans also have converted to orthodox Islam instead of the race-based Nation of Islam. In 1989, 1 million African Americans were Muslims out of 6 million Muslims in the United States. Raboteau says that orthodox Islam has become especially appealing to African-American males as a result of prominent black athletes such as Muhammed Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar converting to Islam and as a result of Muslims being very active in ministering to black males in prison (Raboteau, 2001, 125).

The Emphasis upon Spirituality instead of Christianity

This step away from Christianity by some in the African-American community and by the black literary establishment still does not seem to represent an indifference to spirituality.[3] In fact, it appears that late twentieth century western culture has embraced a new understanding of spirituality that Herrick calls the New Religious Synthesis, a blending

of various religious ideas that first appeared in the West beginning in the 1700s, ideas such as the divinity of reason, the theology of science, pantheism, Gnosticism, shamanism, and mystical pluralism (2003, 250-81). According to Herrick, "So substantial has been the shaping influence of the New Religious Synthesis on contemporary religious thought that it has now displaced the Revealed Word (Judeo-Christianity) as the religious framework of a large and growing number of Western people" (2003, 15). Among many westerners touting this new spirituality is Akasha Gloria Hull whose 2001 book *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African-American Women* incorporates Christian ideas as well as ideas from the New Age Movement such as numerology and 'cosmic centeredness' (Herrick, 2003, 23).

This new understanding of spirituality that Herrick speaks of seems to involve an attempt to blend ideologies and an attempt to divide what does and does not constitute spirituality. It is in this latter attempt that the New Religious Synthesis seems to have influenced how spirituality is often thought of in black literary texts. Frequently, the mention of spirituality in African-American literary texts often describes only the supernatural or some mode of religious expression. For example, twentieth-century critic Harryette Mullen in discussing early African-American writing describes spiritual or visionary literary texts of that period as those which focused on otherworldly concerns or on issues related to worship:

> Alongside the largely secular and overtly political ex-slave narratives, which of necessity are concerned with what happens to the slave's body, an alternate tradition of visionary literacy exists in the tradition of African-American spiritual autobiography, which concerned itself not with the legal status of the material body, but with the shackles placed on the soul and on the spiritual expressiveness of the freeborn or emancipated African American, whose

> religious conversion, sanctification, and worship were expected to conform to the stringent standards of the white Christian establishment. (2000, 627)

While Mullen's description of secular and visionary texts is very useful for exploring the multifaceted interests covered by early African-American writers, it does not fully address the fact that spirituality within the African-American faith tradition has concerned itself, not only with the soul, but with the body also, "bodily" issues encompassing, among many other things, politics, education, housing, and family life. Theologian Michael Dash speaks of the all-encompassing nature of African-American spirituality: "A fundamental understanding of spirituality both for Africans and African Americans is that it is woven into the texture of everyday life and living. Spirituality is not experienced, discussed, nor relegated exclusively to the religious or sacred realm (1997, 251). Dash, along with theologians Jackson and Rasor, says that in Judaism and in traditional African religions and culture, all of which are major sources of African-American spirituality, the world is viewed holistically (1997, 7, 28). According to them, "For the African, life is one integral whole. There is an interrelationship among the several aspects of life: Social life, politics, economics, morality, spirituality all constitute the 'stuff' of life. Human life and existence are guided by religion as a motive principle. Much of this is also a part of contemporary African American religion" (1997, 24). In addition to the New Religious Synthesis, various sources, including the Greek worldview, medieval religious leadership, and Protestant Reformation concepts of a 'two-tier reality' have led to a view which sees reality as divided, which sees spirituality as being but one part of this divided reality:

> [This reality] is divided into two rather distinct parts: sacred-secular, faith-works, church-world, soul-body, spirit-flesh, saint-sinner, prayer-politics, etc.

> So many people accept this dualistic worldview that it is challenging to bear anything else. The problem this creates is a concept of spirituality that is, for the most part, otherworldly, individualistic, and elitist, and it rarely fosters social change. (Dash, Jackson, and Rasor, 1997, 7)

Traditional Views of Spirituality Grounded in Service

This view that connects spirituality to social change has traditionally been found in Judeo-Christianity, a fact evident in Baldwin's life. According to Dash, Jackson, and Rasor, Christian spirituality is very much connected to social change, to bodily and real-world issues:

> Christian spirituality does involve those of us who claim God in Jesus, in the whole of life—both its joy and suffering. We are not removed from the real world by our spirituality; rather, we are thrust the more in it. [. . .]. God invites us to join God in God's world. God is there; we must give ourselves to the task of active participation *there*, even with all of its consequences. (1997, 5)

This admonition for active participation in one's world for the purpose of changing and improving it was a concept that Baldwin learned from his Christian heritage, a heritage that placed before him, as Michael Lynch says, "the ideal of the community" wherein individuals were connected and responsible for one another ("Just Above," 1997, 292, 295). Lynch quotes Baldwin as saying that the church in some ways shaped his view that an individual's talents and skills were meant for uplifting the community:

> 'What is important about my work, which I realized when I was a little boy, partly from the Church perhaps, and whatever happened to my mind all those years I was growing up in the shadow of the Holy Ghost, is that nothing

> belongs to you; it belongs to everybody. My talent does not belong to me, you know; it belongs to you; it belongs to everybody. ("Just Above.' 1997, 292)

Yet, it was not merely the faith of the church in general which impressed Baldwin to value service to the community, it was the specific faith of his mother: "I have known a few Christians. The first Christian I knew was my mother. [. . .]. Somehow she really made us believe it was more important for us to love each other and love other people than anything else" (Mead 1971, 88).

Baldwin, in claiming to have grown up in "the shadow of the Holy Ghost" where he learned that his talents belonged, not only to him, but to everybody, reveals why service, particularly service to one's community, stands as the quintessential element of Judeo-Christian spirituality and of spirituality as traditionally understood in the African-American community. The reason that Baldwin connects the idea of service to spirituality, specifically to the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit, can be best understood in the context of how both theologians and faith-based psychologists define the "Holy Spirit" and how they see it operating in daily human affairs. This context helps clarify why Baldwin frequently references the Holy Spirit when dramatizing a fictional character's spiritual life and that character's attitude toward serving others.

In Judeo-Christianity, spirituality—or what it means to be spiritual, to walk in the spirit—is connected to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not some force or phenomena but, rather, a "He," the third person of the Trinity, sent after the resurrection of Christ to live in and through the believer, to live the life of Christ through believers. According to theologian Paul Little, "God the Holy Spirit is as much a *person* as God the Father and God the Son"

(1987, 74). Little goes on to say that ". . .the Holy spirit has a mind, feelings, and a will, as God the Father does. He is a *person* in this sense" (1987, 75).

Religion scholar Caleb Oladipo points out that the Holy Spirit, as John the disciple speaks of him, helps believers to walk in the ways of God just as Christ, when manifested in the flesh, helped early believers to walk in the ways of God:

> It is clear that the role of a personal advocate is ascribed to the Holy Spirit in [John's thinking]. For John, the Holy Spirit takes the place of the absent Christ. Also, the Holy Spirit was sent by Christ from God; and when the Holy Spirit has come, believers will be guided as Christ guided them during his early ministry. The Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin and lead every believer to the path of righteousness. (1989, 39)

Walking in the path of righteousness or, rather, living out the life of Christ means, among other things, having Christ's mind or attitude, an attitude that leads a believer to obedience to God. The general nature of the obedience that this Christ-like attitude produces is stated in Philippians 2:1-9 where the believer is told to care, not merely for his own needs, but the needs of others, following the example of Christ, who, in caring for the salvation of humanity, divested himself of His deity, became a human being, and purchased humanity's salvation through the death on the cross. It is an obedience that is revealed when an individual acknowledges another's inherent equality by serving that person, that is, by willingly making choices that regard the other person's interests as well as his own. Operating with this type of Christ-like attitude produces the spiritual life, a life in which those characteristics spoken of in Galatians 5:22-23 are exhibited: "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. . . .".

The spiritual person is one who exhibits these qualities as a result of serving others out of his or her obedience to Christ. The spiritual person's service may take on many forms, but whatever the form of service, the server exhibits these qualities, qualities which reflect one attitude—love, that is, an attitude which regards another as an equal, mimicking Jesus' attitude, as He divested himself of His deity and made himself equal to or like humanity to serve/save humanity, a service that culminated in death on the cross. The spiritual person exhibits a lifestyle of service. Theologian Alexander Schmemann replaces the term "spirituality" with "Christian life" to more clearly define what the former term means. Manifesting the love of God, being spiritual is to be like Christ, to be like God (Bishop, 1983, 362). According to Michael Dash, "Spirituality is living life in the Spirit and discovering there the presence of God as love, who challenges us to find and manifest that love through our relationship with others and in God's world. It is a way of being open to Jesus Christ through the Spirit" (1999, 250).

Even modern psychology confirms the connection between spirituality and godlikeness, a godlikeness wherein is implied a sense of charitable service to others, a sense of relating to others in a charitable way. According to Ronald Koteskey in his 1980 discussion of Christian psychology's understanding of the human being, there are many ways in which humans, as finite beings, cannot be like God, but there are also other traits in which they can model Him. While human beings cannot be self-existent or omnipresent as is God, they can and are called by scripture, as Koteskey points out, to exhibit such godly traits as love, mercy, and justice. Despite common resistance in comparing human beings to God, Koteskey affirms this comparison in the sense that spirituality, walking in the spirit, is about exhibiting God-like traits: "Although many people are reluctant to make comparisons

between humans and God, the Bible does so repeatedly. Most Christians want to be more Christ-like: they want to increasingly develop God-likeness in themselves." Koteskey notes in secular psychology how certain traits have been pinpointed as representing those to which human beings aspire and those to which there has often been some connection to deity. For instance, Koteskey points to psychologist Abraham H. Maslow who he says identified thirteen high-aspiring traits of humanity: "goodness, uniqueness, effortlessness, playfulness, truth, honesty, reality, and self-sufficiency." According to Kotesky, Maslow noted that "these were 'attributes assigned to most conceptions of god.' The person at a peak experience is god-like." The godlike attributes that Christian and secular psychology speak of and that are described in scripture, point to godlikeness or, rather, spirituality as being a lifestyle. The spiritual life, reflecting the character of God, is about how one lives. According to Dash, Jackson, and Rasor, "When the Bible speaks of human beings as made in God's image, the suggestion is that it is the image of reflection, as the image of one's face in a mirror. It is not a stamped image, like the image of a dead president on a coin. We have the capability of reflecting God. That is what we are meant to do. Human beings as bodies are products of our past. Human beings equally, as souls, are reflections of God's image" (1997, 21).

It must be acknowledged, though, that Judeo-Christianity also points to a spirituality that is negative rather than affirmative. Traditionally, walking in the spirit has not been associated with spirituality in the former sense. Peter Bishop points to this negative type of spirituality: "What is not always recognized is that 'spirituality' need not necessarily be Christian, i.e. derived from and inspired by the revelation of God in Christ. All religions have their spiritualities. And 'spirituality' is not always good. Adolf Hitler was a spiritual being, a man, more than most, 'possessed'; yet his spirit was surely evil" (1983, 362).

Scripture points to this "evil" spirituality in Ephesians 6:12 when describing the believer's battle against evil: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*." In the case in which being spiritual is understood in a negative way, the spiritual person is one who is evil, that is, one who relates to others in ways that harm rather than serve them. Such a person does not exhibit goodness--the fruit of the spirit--but, rather, evil, also known as the "works of the flesh." In Galatians 5:19-21, the Apostle Paul points to the various forms in which this evil appears:

> Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are *these*:Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told *you* in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit that kingdom of God.

Christian spirituality, as it relates to the Holy Spirit and to the expression of godlike character, particularly the act of serving others, is not to be confused with another aspect of the Holy Spirit that those within the Pentecostal and Holiness movements emphasize. While Christians in these movements have embraced the Spirit's connection to service, they have focused also on the Spirit's ability to endow believers with spiritual gifts and to influence how believers worship. According to Raboteau, the Pentecostal and Holiness movements have believed that the Holy Spirit gifts Christians, the gift of speaking "in unknown tongues just as the disciples of Jesus did on the feast of Pentecost (a religious festival held fifty days after Passover) as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles" (2001, 95). Along with speaking in

tongues, Raboteau says, these movements believe that the Spirit empowers believers in many other ways:

> other gifts of the Spirit [are] prophesy, the ability to predict or reveal the meaning of events; healing, the ability to cure physical and emotional illness by prayer and (usually) by touch; interpretation, the ability to translate and explain the meaning of what is spoken in unknown tongues; and judgment (or distinguishing) of spirits, the ability to determine if a prophecy or other spiritual gift is authentically from God. (2001, 95-96)

In churches which emphasize the Spirit's role in endowing believers with spiritual gifts, believers often get "happy," the Spirit filling them with a feeling of spiritual ecstasy which results in joyous shouting and movement. According to the narrator in Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), "Watching people get happy and fall out under the Power [of the Holy Spirit] is always something to see, even if you see it all the time" (24).

But in his fiction, Baldwin also suggests that Christian spiritual practices that emphasize the Spirit's endowment of gifts as well as the Spirit's influence during worship service, when out of balance, often have the fault of making faith a matter solely of how believers behave in church rather than how believers demonstrate concern for the needs of their families and communities. Baldwin dramatizes in *If Beale Street Could Talk* how such a faulty focus makes it appear that those believers who are most active and audible during church service are the ones who love God the most, which can tempt believers to turn worship service into a competition—whoever is loudest and most visible wins the title of "most devoted to God." The irony in all of this, Baldwin suggests, is that those who are recognized as loving God the most often do the least to serve their families and communities

and also do the least to show the love of God in tangible ways. Such is the case with Mrs. Alice Hunt in *If Beale Street Could Talk.* Mrs. Hunt dislikes her son Fonny because of his dark skin and coarse hair, and when Fonny is falsely accused of rape by a racist police officer, Mrs. Hunt spends more time thinking about how Fonny's incarceration might help Fonny "think on his sins and surrender his soul to Jesus" than about how she might work to help free him (70). Though unwilling to fight for Fonny's freedom and though unwilling to love him as her son, Mrs. Hunt is the very picture of devotion and love to God during Sunday worship services. Such is the case one Sunday, for instance, when Fonny was a boy, long before his incarceration. On that Sunday, Mrs. Hunt carries Fonny to church with her, having slicked down his coarse hair, and invites Fonny's girlfriend Tish to accompany them. In church, Tish and Fonny sit next to each other, and Tish describes Mrs. Hunt's display of godly devotion:

> Mrs. Hunt was singing and clapping her hands. And a kind of fire in the congregation mounted.
>
> Now, I began to watch another [sister of the church], seated on the other side of Fonny, darker and plainer than Mrs. Hunt but just as well dressed, who was throwing up her hands and crying, Holy! Holy! Holy! Bless your name, Jesus! Bless your name, Jesus! And Mrs. Hunt started crying out and seemed to be answering her: it was like they were trying to outdo each other.
>
> . . . On either side of us, all of sudden, the two women were dancing—shouting: the holy dance. People moved around [Fonny and me], to give [the women] room, and they danced in the middle aisle. (27-28)

Despite Mrs. Hunt's display of love for God, Tish recalls the sense of coldness that she and Fonny felt among all those, like Mrs. Hunt, who were clapping and shouting and crying and dancing: "Now, [Fonny and I] knew that nobody loved us [at the church]. [. . .]. Whoever loved us was not here" (28).

Baldwin's concern with spirituality that focuses on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly as expressed in worship service, was not an attempt to denounce such expressions, as is made clear through the narrator in the novel *Just Above My Head* (1979):

> If [my family] did not believe, precisely, in the power of the Holy Ghost, the speaking in tongues, the ecstatic possession, the laying on of hands, neither did we doubt it, nor did we know anyone who doubted. We would understand it better by and by—perhaps, on the whole, that was the way we felt about it. If we found some folks ridiculous, we mocked nobody's faith. We may have considered that they themselves constituted a mockery of their faith, but the faith itself was another matter altogether. (151)

Baldwin's scene suggests that the danger of making faith solely about the individual display of gifts and solely about the outward expressions of godly devotion during Sunday service is that the love of God is squeezed out of faith, leaving the needs of other people unfulfilled, and, therefore, leaving others vulnerable to finding destructive means of fulfilling their needs. According to Tish, this is eventually what happens to two young members of Mrs. Hunt's church who testify during that same Sunday service in which Tish witnesses Mrs. Hunt cry and dance in the aisle. At this service, these two church members, despite their present devotion, have no clue as to the future that awaits them:

> [During the service], somebody was testifying, a young man with kind of reddish hair, he was talking about the Lord and how the Lord had dyed all the spots out of his soul and taken all the lust out of his flesh. When I got older, I used to see him around. His name was George: I used to see him nodding on the stoop or on the curb, and he died of an overdose. [. . .]. . . . [Then] another sister, her name was Rose, [testified]; not much later she was going to disappear from the church and have a baby—and I still remember the last time I saw her, when I was about fourteen, walking the streets in the snow with her face all marked and her hands all swollen and a rag around her head and her stockings falling down . . . (26)

These two young people, as Baldwin suggests, eventually become lost adults because their spirituality has done nothing for them or others, being absent of love and community, to sustain them, to break their falls. Their spirituality exists in contrast to what Dash, Jackson, and Rasor view as a Christian spirituality which emphasizes, not the gifts of the spirit, but, rather, the way in which the spirit influences believers to serve, to live out their spirituality so as to help the fallen or to be helped up when they themselves fall:

> We experience love and learn how to love within a social setting: the family, the neighborhood, school, church and wider society. Therefore, our spirituality may be described as being personally experienced, but in fact it is a reality created within the community of others. We are spiritual beings but within a larger spiritual context. We are ‘we’ and not simply an ‘I’ as we develop a deeper spirituality. True spirituality can never ignore what happens to our selves in our communities. Herein lies a recurring challenge to us as

> humans: It is to recognize and affirm our interdependence that we *are* one another's keepers. (1997, 4)

This type of spirituality which, the author says, is realized within the context of community, which is realized when members of a community look after the welfare of one another, is a spirituality that Julia, a character in Baldwin's novel *Just Above My Head* (1979), adopts, ironically, only after she steps out of the pulpit. In the pulpit as an 11-year-old child evangelist, Julia clings to a brand of spirituality which is out of balance, being focused on the giftings of the Holy Spirit, void of how those gifts may be employed in addressing the needs of her community, specifically, her family. Julia and her parents exhibit great pride in Julia's gift of prophecy, that is, her ability to speak the truth of God. This pride in Julia's spiritual gift is evident in the ease with which Julia is able to 'prophecy' and, thus, manipulate her parents into thinking she has spoken the very words and mind of God, as she did one day when she and her parents were visiting their friends Paul and Florence Montana. During that visit Paul Montana suggests to Julia's parents that Julia, despite her status as an evangelist, is still a child. As such, he says, she needs proper discipline just as her younger brother Jimmy does, Jimmy having become, in the name of discipline, the object of his parents' abuse when they mistake his frustration with Julia's spiritual insincerity for jealousy. Upon hearing Paul Montana's suggestion, Julia, calling herself "the Lord's anointed," deflects her parents' attention from this advice and persuades her parents, as the narrator points out, to cut their visit short:

> 'My father,' said Julia and left his lap and stood in the center of the room, 'my father'—in that really terrifying voice, one could not imagine where it came from—'I am to deliver the Word tonight, and we must not break bread

> in this house.' Tears rolled down her face. 'You[, Paul Montana,] have mocked the Lord's anointed,' she said, 'and I—I am about My Father's business,' and she walked out of the room. [. . .].
>
> 'She must go as the Lord leads her,' [Julia's mother] Amy said. [Amy] put her arm through her husband's; they moved toward the door. . . . and then they walked out of the living room, down the hall. (76-77)

The hollowness of Julia's spirituality, the inability of her spirituality to unite her family, the way her spirituality actually rips apart her family is revealed when her mother eventually dies of a sickness that may have been healed had her anointed daughter "allowed" her to get medical treatment in time, and when, after the death of her mother, Julia becomes uncertain about her faith and leaves the pulpit, and when her once-doting father begins abusing her for leaving the pulpit and, thereby, devastating the family financially. However, when Julia leaves the pulpit, she develops a spirituality that becomes focused, not upon her spiritual gifting and the special "anointed" status that this gifting lent her, but upon her faithful service to her brother. Honoring a promise made to her mother, she begins tending to the welfare of her brother, his welfare being for her, though she is only 14 years old, "the only reason that she had to live" (233). Even when she and her brother are adults, Julia acts as a mother to him, saying of her brother, "I don't know enough to change him, or to save him. But I know enough to be there. I *must* be there" (361). In uniting her to her brother, Julia's newfound spirituality enables her to literally become her brother's keeper. In emptying or pouring out herself for her brother, Julia has tapped into what religion scholar George Ellis might describe as the "essence" of spirituality, and she has been transformed by it, no longer being a self-seeking, spoiled child, but, rather, a mature adult who relates to her brother charitably.

According to Ellis, who helped co-author the book *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* and who won a 2004 Templeton prize for his research regarding the intersection of science and religion, the spiritual life of service is described in Greek as "kenosis," a word that appears in Philippians and means "to empty oneself" or to give up "on behalf of other people" (2004, 6). Ellis says kenosis is a moral principle and, like scientific and mathematical principles, is a natural part of the universe, a part of the universe that has been discovered by people of various faiths. It is a principle that proves its existence, first, in the way many faiths value it, and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, in the way it transforms lives:

> We haven't got a clue in what way mathematics is embedded [in the universe], but it is there in some plutonic space waiting to be discovered. We actually haven't got a clue how the laws of physics are embedded in the universe. We know they're there, we know they're effective. [. . .]. In the same way I envisage ethics as being a universal thing, which is applicable. It is there because of the nature of God. It is something we discover and don't invent. [. . .]. The evidence [for the existence of kenosis] is firstly in seeing that all these other religious traditions have come to the same conclusion. But the deep evidence is the same in all faith[s]. It is by beginning to comprehend the deep nature of this transforming current [of kenosis], if you see the deepness and the quality of transformation that is possible through this. And if you're really asking for truth, then it is the life of Christ which is the example, giving up life in order that those that persecuted him would have freedom. That is what it is about. And in the end, it is self-authenticating.

> There is actually no other way of saying it. It is something you either see or you don't see. There is no proof. It's something you recognize or you don't recognize" (2004, 12).

Ellis points out that kenosis, which reflects the nature of God, reveals itself in acts of humility and sacrifice and also expresses itself in degrees. Extreme expressions of kenosis appear in individuals such as Ghandi, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Jesus Christ, who, according to Ellis, is the "ultimate" example. Though kenosis in the extreme is about sacrificing one's life, in a general, daily sense, kenosis "is the basic work of relationship and community, of balancing self-interest with the good of others" (2004, 11). On a daily level, kenosis is about being willing to "just step back a little bit more so that there's room for the community to function" (2004, 13). Dash, Jackson, and Rasor confirm the idea that authentic spirituality actually fosters community by drawing individuals away from self-absorption and into relationship with others:

> Our spirituality must be such that it drives us to build relationships. It must reunite us with our Creator. It is not some kind of personal piety that has little to do with others and the world. It has everything to do with our relationships with and among peoples in this one world. Other women and men, other persons representing different ethnicities and classes are in this world with us. We are 'in this' world together. We were so created to be in community, one with another. It is a destructive idea to see one's spirituality as something that we only do or experience individually. We are blind to the wholeness of the created order if we assume that spirituality has nothing to do with the social,

> economic, and political life of our neighbor—both next door and across the globe. (1997, 9)

The demonstration of kenosis, that is, the way in which members of a community forge relationships built upon the mutual concern that they have for one another, describes what typically has been meant by "spirituality" in the African-American faith tradition. This understanding of spirituality, inherited by the faith tradition from both African custom and Judeo-Christianity, has been termed the black helping tradition. According to sociologists Elmer and Joanne Martin, the black helping tradition is an element of "the largely independent struggle of blacks for their survival and advancement from generation to generation" (1985, 4). In the black helping tradition, kenosis in theory appears as a set of principles and practices fashioned within a particular worldview, a worldview that takes into account the unique experiences of African Americans:

> [T]he black helping tradition is not merely the handing down of a set of ideas; rather, it is the handing down of the 'whole social environment' and a prescription of how blacks should deal with the 'ordinary occasions of life.' It is not the practice of unrelated, fragmented, and aimless beliefs, but a phenomenon that is significantly intertwined with the whole culture of black people and the quest of blacks for survival and advancement. (1985, 3)

The manifestation of kenosis within the black helping tradition wherein community members show concern for one another by passing on principles steeped in the context of the African-American experience, is particularly evident in Baldwin's works. For instance, in a letter that Baldwin wrote to the nephew named after him, Baldwin gives James a worldview of sorts; then, he lays out for James a life principle. In establishing this worldview, Baldwin

informs his nephew that socially constructed identities label African Americans as incapable of living up to their ideal human selves intellectually, morally, financially, and in every other way:

> You , [James], were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. ("My Dungeon Shook," 1962, 335)

Within the context of this worldview, Baldwin then prescribes a belief by which he says his nephew should live. Baldwin tells him, specifically, that remembering his ancestors will enable him to cling to—even recover—his ideal human self in the midst of those who oppose his existence:

> [James,] know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go. [. . .]. . . .you come from sturdy, peasant stock, men who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and, in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity. You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, 'The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.' ("My Dungeon Shook," 1962, 336)

In caring for his nephew's well-being, in seeking to help his nephew live life while firmly holding to his human worth, Baldwin exhibits a community-oriented, service-minded

attitude, an attitude that stands as the spiritual foundation of the black helping tradition, a tradition that began in traditional African culture where charity was the norm.

Within this tradition, the basic life philosophy was, according to John Mbiti, " 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am,' which means that traditional Africans did not see themselves as individuals with a concern for self over the group, but saw the group as a corporate part of the individual personality" (Martin and Martin, 1985, 12). In the New World, slaves remembered this African heritage of helping. Martin and Martin record from John Blassingame one slave's recollection of this heritage:

> 'I was born in Africa, several hundred miles up the Gambia River. Fine country dat; but we are called heathen in dis Christian—no, I don't know what to call it—in dis enlightened heathen country. But the villagers in that country are kind. When you go into house, first question is, have you had anything to eat? Bring water, you wash, and den eat much you want; and all you got do is thank them for it—not one fip you pay. If you are sick, nurse you, and make you well—not one fip you pay. If you want clothing, one woman put in two knots warp, one put in two knots filling, and so on; den men weave it, and you cut just such garment you like—not one fip you pay.' (1985, 17)

Martin and Martin say that slavery, without intending to do so, actually strengthened traditional African self-help activities since slaves had to work together in order to survive the demands of slavery:

> If slaves had not cooperated with one another, it is not likely that they would have survived the oppressive rigors of the [slave] system. Slavery inadvertently reinforced the African helping tradition. Slaves had to build

> their own homes, which they constructed according to African architecture and from what they had learned from white men. Both the skills of housebuilding and the practice of Africans working communally to build homes for their people were carried over into slavery. The hunting, trapping, and gardening that slaves had to do to supplement the scanty rations they received from the slave master were additional skills that blacks had learned in Africa. Moreover, since slaves were generally responsible for taking care of their sick, they relied heavily on their traditional African use of herbs, spices, ointments, and linaments to cure a host of ailments. [. . .]. And, what is most important is that the slaves learned a vital lesson from their African ancestors: to take the resources their environment and nature had to offer and make a way of themselves. (1985, 16-17)

Even with their freedom gained, many ex-slaves continued the helping tradition by seeking to free others still in bondage, one of the most famous examples of this being Harriet Tubman who went back into slavery 19 times and was able to rescue over 300 slaves (Martin and Martin, 1985, 34-35). Though the bulk of self-help activities were found within the extended family, before and during reconstruction, institutional forms of the helping tradition arose via churches, benevolent societies, fraternal societies, and women's clubs. These organizations built schools and libraries, offered burial services and medical care, and built homes for the elderly and for orphans, particularly since slavery and the Civil War left many children without parents. In terms of carrying on the black helping tradition "the extended family ranked first, the black church ranked second, and the woman's clubs ranked third" (Martin and Martin, 1985, 57).

In the twentieth century, the importance of the extended family and the community in serving individual members and thereby enabling those members to progress through life remained important. This was especially true during the time of Baldwin's childhood when southern blacks began migrating north. However, the black helping tradition in these communities transformed slightly, involving not just blacks helping blacks, but blacks helping and being helped by those of various racial backgrounds. Service was a way of life in these newly formed, multiracial communities in which Baldwin lived, according to biographer David Leeming:

> The Harlem to which [Baldwin's mother] and so many other black southerners came in the twenties and thirties and in which James Baldwin was raised was in many ways a southern community. Parents knew each other and each other's children, and there was a sense of responsibility for one's neighbor. If Mrs. Smith saw one of Mrs. Brown's children doing something wrong, she applied discipline first and then let Mrs. Brown know about it. And Harlem was still multiracial. There was community in poverty rather than a hopeless isolation. This is not to say there was no racial conflict. Baldwin remembered fighting frequently with an Italian neighbor called Tony—a boy of his age—but he also remembered sharing meals with him. (11)

Baldwin's memory of family members and multiracial neighbors from the community helping one another is particularly apparent in *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974). In the novel, Fonny's unjustified incarceration propels to service, not only his family, but others from within the community. While Fonny's father, his girlfriend Tish, and Tish's family take

on extra jobs and conduct their own investigation in the hope of finding the truth that will free Fonny, other members of the community help them in various ways: the white lawyer Hayward, despite scorn from his colleagues, persists in revealing the racist motives which led Officer Bell to arrest Fonny; the "olive-skinned" apartment owner Levy awaits Fonny's vindication, pledging to hold an apartment that Fonny and Tish had leased before Fonny was arrested; and Spanish waiters at Fonny's favorite restaurant drive a pregnant Tish to see Fonny in jail and then feed her at their restaurant, saying, "[Fonny] will not forgive us, if we let you starve" (61).

The multi-racial element within the black helping tradition that Baldwin witnessed as a child seems to identify service as that which grows out of the need among community members to survive. However, both historically and in contemporary times, service within the context of the black helping tradition has been first and foremost driven by faith, particularly, according to Martin and Martin, Christian faith:

> [For free blacks and slaves], religious consciousness, like fictive kinship ties and racial consciousness, was a key mechanism for spreading black caregiving from the family to the community. Religious-conscious blacks saw Jesus Christ as the quintessence of the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood—as the greatest caring, giving, and sharing role model to be found on earth. Their love of God and, more important, their belief in God's love for them, was the bulwark on which rested their thirst for freedom and their desire to help others to be free. Even when racist whites took the brotherhood out of Christianity and made it an instrument of slavery and oppression, the religion of free blacks and slaves taught them that slavery was an abomination

> in the eyes of God and that, God, one day, with all His fiery wrath, would destroy such a wicked institution. (1985, 38)

For the nineteenth-century black church, the black helping tradition described the church's identity and goals. According to theologian Gayraud Wilmore, the church believed that being black was about affirming the humanity of blacks and about seeing to their freedom in both personal and social arenas:

> The Black Church of the nineteenth century, despite its 'client' relationship to White churches, was clearer about its identity than many of us are today. It knew itself to be God's judgment upon the inhumanity of racism. Its Blackness was, therefore, an expression of its sense of cultural vocation. By every measure it was an amazing institution. Led for the most part by illiterate preachers, many of whom were slaves or recently freedmen, poverty-stricken and repressed by custom and law, this church converted thousands, stabilized family life, established insurance and burial societies, founded schools and colleges, commissioned missionaries to the far corners of the world, and *at the same time* agitated for the abolition of slavery, supported illegal actions in behalf of fugitives, organized the Underground Railroad, fomented slave uprisings, promoted the Civil War, developed community political education and action in behalf of civil rights, and provided the social, economic, political, and cultural base of the entire Black community in the United States. This was a church that had a way of identifying itself which symbolized its calling to serve the broad needs of Black humanity. Its identity and vocation went hand and hand. The term "African," which had the same

> force as the term "Black" has for some Black Christians today, was avowed by Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians alike a badge of pride in origin and in a cultural vocation to vindicate Black humanity and the dignity of their life together through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (1979, 245)

Baldwin's Attempt to Disconnect Traditional Spirituality from Faith

In the twentieth century during the decades before the rise of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., many Northern black churches dismissed faith-based service efforts. As a result, the black helping tradition became inactive, breeding a faith that Baldwin felt was not faith at all. As black migrants moved from the South to the North, northern black churches shunned them, claiming that church resources were inadequate to meet the needs of the migrants. In actuality, according to Pinn, these churches were more concerned that the migrants' worship styles and practices would make it impossible for the churches to remain mainstream and, therefore, acceptable to the larger white society:

> For these churches it was far better to exclude these newcomers, and the religious rationale for this often revolved around an 'otherworldly' orientation through which primary concern was given to the individual spiritual renewal. Churches that made this move left the socioeconomic and political needs of African-Americans to secular organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (172)

James Baldwin complained about this as he witnessed the Christian church, both black and white, in various ways, not only ignore its mandate to serve, but actually oppose it. He recalled a time when a white Christian acquaintance of his faced the church's disapproval for

his efforts to help minority children: “He was simply working with young kids in settlement houses up and down Manhattan—blacks and Puerto Ricans, some of whom were junkies. He was doing what he could to rehabilitate—in fact, to love—those children. The parish priest disapproved and kicked him out” (Mead, 1971, 91). According to Hardy, Baldwin spoke with Christian ethicist Reinhold Neibhur in 1963 about the passivity of established churches throughout the years as blacks were intimidated, as their institutions and homes were bombed: “Baldwin was frustrated by the church’s’ inability to express true Christian love, but he could not help seeing the civil rights movement as a chance for black people to enact the redemption of a United States founded on the notion of freedom” (2003, 48). In some ways, Baldwin’s desire for this redemption was realized because the civil rights movement did quicken for the black churches the spirit of black helping tradition:

> For King and his followers the Christian church had a responsibility for bringing the teachings of Christ to bear on the racial problems confronting the United States. Through the Montgomery bus boycott (1954), the march on Washington (1963), the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the work in Birmingham (1965), and the sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis (1968), King and the civil rights movement tried to bring the Christian church into contact with the lived situation of African-Americans, offering resources and physical bodies to the cause of freedom. (Pinn, 2002, 174)

It was King’s faith-based service that, according to Baldwin, made King’s spirituality real: “Martin’s a very rare, a very great man. Martin’s rare for two reasons: probably just because he *is*; and because he’s a real Christian” (*King, Malcolm, and Baldwin,* 1963, 60).

Despite his admiration for King, Baldwin still chose to ground his ideas about service in contexts other than faith, even though the civil rights movement had revived the black helping tradition within the black churches, a revival which is apparent even today. Since the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem has built homes for the elderly and renovated apartments for the homeless. In the 1980s, the Bridge Street African Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church in Brooklyn began operating a wide-scale outreach program with over sixty clubs and auxiliaries that do everything from distribute food to the poor to hold classes for individuals wanting to earn their high school diplomas (Raboteau, 2001, 132). With a decrease in state and federal programs since the 1980s, black churches have been called upon to serve society's most vulnerable in even greater ways. According to Raboteau, "Because of cuts in tax money for these programs, less public assistance became available for the homeless, the poor, the elderly, children, and the mentally ill. Therefore, private organizations—which in the black community meant primarily the churches—have had to step in to attempt to help some of the neediest citizens in the United States" (2001, 133).

Unlike many in the black church, though, Baldwin tends often to divorce spirituality—the spiritual life of service—from faith in God. The groundwork for his attempt may have begun when he was a child and recalled charitable service being lived out in surprising corners, corners seemingly very far-removed from the church:

> My favorite teacher happened to be a black lady; then, later on, a white school teacher who was a Communist. . . . But she fed us and took me to the theater and things like that. And she was the first human being to sort of move out of that kind of monolithic mass that is composed of landlords, the

> pawnbrokers and the cops who beat you up. She gave me my first key, my first clue that white people were human. (Mead, 1971, 24)

For Baldwin, the humanity of his teacher was revealed in her willingness to help him, to play a part in saving him from hunger, from poverty, from the streets. Her service helped to save him spiritually, too, from loss of hope and self-imposed isolation. In this, one sees that for Baldwin, service is a means of salvation. He sees service as a means to salvation, as a means of "saving" or building up individuals and the community. In some ways, this is contrary to a Judeo-Christian understanding in which spiritual salvation is thought to come only through God, the giver of life, and His son Jesus, the manifestation of God in the flesh. In other words, through faith in God through Christ, one repents of his or her sins and then is able to partake of God's promise of eternal life in heaven and His promise of an "abundant life" on earth, an abundant life which is possible as an individual serves out of obedience to God's laws. In Judeo-Christianity, service is what individuals do as a *result* of being saved. They serve, or rather, love others with the love they have received from God. Salvation is not the result of works of service. However, works of service can "save" individuals in the physical sense of ushering them into a better life on earth, a life of greater opportunities and resources. This service, however, is not the road to salvation that leads to eternal life with God. According to Lynch, "Baldwin's concept of salvation does not exclude (and even implies) a traditional Christian understanding of everlasting bliss, it also signifies survival and happiness in this world" where salvation is achieved, among other avenues, through service, "selfless action based on accepting responsibility for all people" ("Just Above," 1997, 293). Judeo-Christianity, though, defines salvation, in its truest sense, as beginning with an

individual choosing to place his or her faith in Christ and, from that decision, being able to live with the hope of eternal life while serving others upon the earth.

Traditional Spirituality Identified in Modern Works of Black Writers

While Baldwin does reverse the connection between service and salvation and while he does dramatize favorably certain practices, like homosexuality, forbidden by the faith tradition, he remains committed to charitable service. His constant call for human beings to care for each other stands as the element of Christian spirituality in his novels. Like Baldwin, younger black writers have not abandoned a high regard for service, even when they have ignored, dismissed, or remained silent about Christianity. For them, service is often lived out, not in the context of faith in God and Jesus Christ, but, rather, with an awareness of an ancestor or god-like figure, someone older and wiser who points to service as an imperative or who stands as an example of what it means to serve. According to Toni Morrison, the presence of a wise elder, one who provides guidance, is common in African-American literature. Embracing the elder's wisdom makes survival possible:

> these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom. [. . .] You know there are a lot of people who talk about the position that men hold as of primary importance, but actually it is if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost. [. . .]. When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. ("Rootedness" 1999, 201-202)

For prose writers after Baldwin, writers whose works appear a decade or more after the publication of Baldwin's first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), the ancestor's call to

service is sometimes heeded and is sometimes ignored. But, whatever the response to the call, service is presented as the means by which the oppressed, the suffering, the victimized can claim their humanity, their godlikeness. In contemporary African-American texts, service is dramatized in many different ways, but it generally appears as an opportunity that suffering characters have to bring their resources to bear on the lives of others in need, to reach out to those in their families and communities. Some characters fail to see the opportunity that confronts them as an opportunity, even though an ancestor points it out to them. As a result, their suffering deepens as they spend their time, not serving others, but looking to be served. Such is the case with Martha, the eighteen-year-old protagonist of the 1967 short story "Tell Martha Not to Moan," written by Sherley Anne Williams, who calls Baldwin one of her literary kin. Martha's ancestor, the one who provides her with instruction and wisdom, is her mother, a mother who is never able to help Martha see the value of service. Martha's life has become one of great passivity. She sits, waiting for her boyfriend Time to come back to her. She watches her mother work while she herself survives on welfare. She blames her absent father for making her life unproductive while she at times lies in bed after late-night dancing. In her passivity, Martha forgets the power that lies in her own hands to work, to serve, to care for the needs of her children, herself, and the larger community. As a result, she becomes someone who uses others and is used by them. Her boyfriend Time leaves her pregnant just as the father of her previous child left her. In her self-centeredness, in her romantic but erroneous dreams of Time returning to provide for her, Martha tunes out the voice of the ancestor—her mother, a mother who had named her after the scriptural Martha known for her zealous religious service, a mother who tells her from

experience, “You ain’t got the time to be patient, to be waiting for Time or no one else to make no place for you” (1997, 2361-2375).

Martha’s self-centered approach toward others, toward life, is especially revealed when she tells a group of friends, “Somebody you don’t like, you supposed to take em for everything they got. Take em and tell em to kiss you butt” (1997, 2373). Her attitude is the very opposite of Fonny’s attitude in Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Fonny decides, despite being in jail under false assault charges, that he will look outward, seeking to serve his family, his community. As he sits in jail, he tells his girlfriend: “I’m going to *build* us a table and a whole lot of folks going to be eating off it for a long, *long* time to come” (209). His attitude is the one that Paul D exhibits in the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Morrison credits Baldwin with challenging her as a writer to “stand on moral ground . . . shored up by mercy” (“Life in His” 75). After initially rejecting his friend Sethe because she murdered her child many years ago, Paul D returns to her on her sickbed, her sickness being rooted in her guilt over the long-ago murder and in the community’s abandonment of her because of it. Paul D serves Sethe just by being a friend again and reminding her “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (1987, 273). Paul D’s return to Sethe, realizing that he is his “sister’s” keeper, stands as just one example of spirituality in *Beloved.*

Conclusion

The exalted place that service holds in the works of James Baldwin stands as evidence that Baldwin, though disappointed with what he believed was the failure of many within the Christian church to live out their faith, still found the faith itself a necessary context for understanding life. Service, in the Christian faith tradition, describes what it means to be spiritual, to walk in the spirit. It is not completely true, as some say, that

Baldwin opened the door for black writers who came after him to create worlds that dismiss the church or abandon any sense of a Christian worldview. While he did criticize the church and while he did boldly embrace practices such as homosexuality that were traditionally forbidden by the church, he still held service in high regard. No matter how unorthodox his Christian faith became, he believed, like the Christian church, that human beings should serve one another, should bring their resources to bear on the lives of one another. Thus, rather than seeing Baldwin only as one who allowed others to dismiss Christianity, it is also important to view him as one who reveals to contemporary readers and writers what constitutes Christian spirituality in contemporary African-American literary works. In doing this, he reminds many, particularly the black literary community, that the Christian faith continues to be one legitimate way of looking at spirituality. He also offers the critic fresh ways of understanding spirituality, ways that do not include just the supernatural or just church-based activities.

Conclusion

Baldwin argues through his fictional and non-fictional works that modern institutions, particularly in America, operate upon philosophical frameworks that are grounded in distorted Christian theology, a theology that associates those in power with godlike characteristics and those who stand on the margins of society with ungodlytraits. These frameworks, Baldwin suggests, deny the innate human worth of all people, making those who are deemed subhuman vulnerable to oppression. The danger in this comes from the fact that oppression, whether steeped in racism or some other form of discrimination, can be murderous:

> . . .the glorification of one race and the consequence debasement of another—or others—always has been and always will be a recipe for murder. There is no way around this. If one is permitted to treat any group of people with special disfavor because of their race or the color of their skin, there is no limit to what one will force them to endure, and since the entire race has been mysteriously indicted, no reason not to attempt to destroy it root and branch. This is precisely what the Nazis attempted. Their only originality lay in the means they used. It is scarcely worthwhile to attempt remembering how many times the sun has looked down on the slaughter of the innocents. (“Down at the Cross,” 1963, 369)

The only way that oppression fails in destroying those afflicted by it, Baldwin says, is if the oppressed remember, even as they are suffering, their innate human worth and manifest that remembrance by serving others who are also being oppressed.

While this willingness to serve will indeed help the oppressed to endure and survive, it will not end oppression, since human beings generally refuse to accept the equal humanity of one another. This refusal represents, Baldwin says, humanity's internal "wilderness." Human beings have, Baldwin argues, a part of them where chaos reigns, where lack of productivity, where lack of order and growth exists. In this wildness, this chaos, there is the tangling up of vines and roots, the choking off of life. In creating ideologies that allow them to live out their wild fantasies about some of them being more human than others, human beings fill the world with darkness, with falsehood. In this dark world, it becomes the role of the artist to enlighten others in hopes that the humanity of no individual will be choked off: ". . . the conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty. He is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself. The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of [each person's] purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place" ("The Creative Process," 1962, 316).

Review of Chapters

In his effort to illuminate the darkness, Baldwin claims, as Chapter I points out, that all human beings, regardless of factors such as race, nationality, and social status, are innately and equally human. He even suggests, like many in the African-American faith tradition and like biblical writers such as the Apostle Paul, that human equality is natural, is divinely mandated. And as such, human equality, or at least the proclamation of it, particularly in written discourse, is the proclamation of truth itself.

Yet, for all those proclaiming truth, that is, human equality, there are still those who stand as advocates of falsehood, insisting upon the lesser humanity of certain individuals. As

examined in Chapter II, Baldwin shows in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1978) how those advocates of falsehood, empowered as members of various modern social institutions, use false narratives to further their belief that all people are not divinely created, that all do not possess the potential to develop into their ideal human selves. Baldwin suggests that their narratives, which are found in a variety of places, from newspaper articles to police reports, attempt to dismiss human equality as a philosophical truth by divorcing narrative subjects from any sort of historical context. Fighting against such oversimplifications and prejudices, Baldwin uses his novels to provide proper historical context and thereby reveal the humanity of the characters who serve as subjects of his narratives.

The tragic element of Baldwin's art is that often knowledge of the humanity of these characters is known only by readers of his novels, not by the society he portrays. Only readers of Baldwin's novels possess this privileged information. Within the fictional societies of Baldwin's novels, the dehumanizing false images of certain characters are considered by society at large as accurate representations of who the characters are. These false images cause characters great suffering. In other words, because the characters are portrayed as being less than human, they are treated unjustly, inhumanly and often succumb to the negative images imposed on them. Baldwin reveals, however, how sometimes unjust treatment actually pushes people into becoming more, not less, than their human selves. In their suffering, these characters gain insight into their humanity and as a result, feel compelled to serve other sufferers so that they too might remember that they are fully endowed human beings.

As such, Baldwin reveals the important role of service in the lives of those who must fight, perhaps more than some, to believe that they are human. In valuing service, Baldwin aligns himself with the Christian-based faith tradition he embraced as a youth. As an adult, though deeply frustrated with what he perceived to be the unloving character both of the black Pentecostal church wherein he had served as a boy preacher and of the Christian church in general, Baldwin still valued service, service being the essence of spirituality within Judeo-Christianity. In writing about this, Baldwin also reveals to many in the black literary establishment who define spirituality solely within the realm of the supernatural or the church that spirituality also manifests itself in the way in which communities are shown to be places of conversation and caring and in the way individuals serve one another, reminding each other that they are human beings, not beasts nor devils. The deeper principles of Christian thought, he shows, are accepting of all, giving to all, and spirituality is not confined to the realm of either the supernatural or the established church.

Baldwin's Apocalyptic Vision

Unfortunately, many of Baldwin's characters do not live in communities wherein they are reminded of their humanity; as a result, Baldwin says, they end up lying in "wine and urine-stained hallways" not knowing that they "are very beautiful"("Down at the Cross,"1963, 379). Baldwin predicts that humanity, if it does not work to stop this loss of beauty, will see the arrival one day of "cosmic vengeance," It is "a vengeance that does not really depend on, and cannot really be executed by, any [single] person or organization, and that cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, 'Whatever goes up must come down' " ("Down at the Cross," 1963, 379).

In America, this day of cosmic vengeance may be staved off if individuals of various racial backgrounds choose to fashion ideologies and to institute practices that acknowledge the human worth of all citizens. If this is not done and false notions of human inferiority and superiority persist, Baldwin says cosmic vengeance may be inevitable:

> If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve [the goals of] our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: 'God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the first next time!' ("Down at the Cross," 1963, 379)

Speaking of flood and fire, Baldwin uses biblical terms to characterize the coming day of cosmic vengeance, alluding to the destruction of the world by floodwaters as recorded in Genesis and referring to the prophetic end of the world by fire as recorded in Revelation. For Baldwin, these are not literal but metaphorical, a way to characterize the fall of a social order—"what goes up must come down"—based in greed and human inequality. Coming from a fire-and-brimstone evangelical tradition, however, he is doubtless aware that in Revelation 21:8, the biblical writer John prophecies that God in the end times will establish a new heaven and earth, burning in the lake of fire those who have lived in defiance of God's will. In that verse, John says, "the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone." Baldwin uses this biblical fire as a

metaphor for what he sees as a possible day when society's oppressed and marginalized will pour forth angrily, ready to "precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream," this dream being the unfulfilled promise that all American citizens are equal and have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness ("Down at the Cross," 1963, 371). Baldwin says that anger among the marginalized will arise in response to the way those in power have manipulated laws "in order to stay on top," allowing oppression, not equality, to flourish ("Down at the Cross," 1963, 379).

This fiery revolt will come when the marginalized, having spent many years waiting for a fairer, more equitable day, realize that those in power are unwilling to change. Already, according to Baldwin, the rumblings of such a revolt are coming from marginalized individuals who are creating new ideologies to replace those that have oppressed and dehumanized them. One such revolutionary, Baldwin says, is Stokely Carmichael:

> When Stokely talks about black power, he is simply translating into the black idiom what the English said hundreds of years ago and have always proclaimed as their guiding principle, black power translated means the self-determination of people. It means that, nothing more and nothing less. [. . .]. Stokely's only insisting that he is present only once on this earth as a man . . . not as something to be manipulated or defined by others, but as a man himself, on this earth, under the sky; on the same lonely journey we all make, alone. ("White Racism or World Community," 1968, 438-39)

Too many of the marginalized are unlike Carmichael, though, Baldwin says. Instead of fashioning new ideologies and, thereby, precipitating a social revolt, they respond to oppression meekly, with faith, perhaps slowing down what might otherwise be an unjust

society's speedy reversal. Baldwin says that those who find faith a tool for dealing with oppression recognize that they are often judged only in the light of their failures. Their failures, instead of being viewed in the context of oppressive circumstances, are held up as evidence of their lesser humanity, as evidence of some lack within them. Through faith, though, Baldwin says, many of the marginalized find in God someone who witnesses the struggles that precede their failures, struggles that speak of their humanity, that is, their human desire to live and not succumb to oppression:

> Only the Lord saw the midnight tears, only He was present when [they], moaning and wringing hands, paced up and down the room. [Only He was aware of how their frustrations] reverberated through heaven and became part of the pain of the universe. [. . .]. It was the Lord who knew of the impossibility [they] faced: how to prepare [their] child for the day when the child would be despised and how to *create* in that child—by what means?—a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself. ("Notes of a Native Son," 1955,140)

Though the faith-minded may retard the arrival of cosmic vengeance, they cannot prevent it, particularly since society at large makes no attempt to rid itself of the poison of oppression. This does not mean, as Baldwin suggests, that a day of fiery revolt is necessarily good, but only that it is inevitable since oppressors seem inclined to continue oppressing. To help revolutionaries and the faith-minded survive oppression, whether the day of fiery revolt comes in their lifetime or not, Baldwin offers warnings and prescriptions. He warns revolutionaries against growing bitter as they cry out for change, and he warns the faith-minded against losing sight of social concerns as they seek affirmation from God. In

Giovanni's Room (1956), Baldwin's character David places people in various groups depending on their responses to oppression: some become bitterly mad; others, insanely mad, and still others, heroic. These groups provide a means for understanding Baldwin's warnings to the marginalized. The label "bitterly mad" might best describe revolutionaries whose response to oppression has gone awry, and the label "insanely mad" might describe the faith-minded whose response has likewise gone wrong. Baldwin suggests that both groups are forced to live with the menacing presence of oppression because in modern society, paradise—an ideal world of human equality—is unsustainable. This is evident in the fact that, as Baldwin says, "people are not . . . terribly anxious to be equal . . . but they love the idea of being superior" ("Down at the Cross," 1963, 371). Such circumstances make it easy, on the one hand, for revolutionaries to become so focused on the oppressor that they grow bitter and suspicious and, on the other, for the faith-minded to so fixate on paradise—heavenly paradise—that they ignore oppression, insanely pretending that it either does not matter or does not exist. Baldwin suggests in *Giovanni's Room* that one group is just as bad as the other because their responses to oppression grow out of despair, despair over the world's inability to sustain perfection, to treat all people with fairness and dignity:

> Perhaps everyone has a garden of Eden, I don't know; but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword [that drives them out and prevents their return]. Then, perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or: it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court

> another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare. (29)

In *Just Above My Head* (1979), Joel is unique among Baldwin's characters for he represents, at different times, both groups. During the preaching days of his daughter Julia, he lives as one insanely mad, so engrossed with his daughter's divine calling that he stands unconcerned, not only about the neglect and oppression of his son Jimmy, but also about the oppression surrounding his own life as a black man in a racist society. After Julia's preaching days, Joel becomes a member of the bitterly mad, seeing everything and everyone, especially his daughter, as conspiring to keep him down and running away from his responsibilities.

Unlike Joel, those who respond properly to oppression become heroes. They refuse to grow bitter as a result of thinking only about their oppressors. Yet, they also refuse to divorce faith from daily living and do not ignore the social ramifications of oppression in their lives and the lives of other marginalized peoples. Rather, they walk middle ground, acknowledging oppression while striving for a life that regards others as their equal. Figuratively, they, like Fonny in *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), build a table of fellowship even as they sit in jail because of the false accusations of a racist police officer. Keeping faith in their own humanity and resisting defeat or despair because of terrible social wrong, they are able to hold on to their human selves. This balanced response is the prescription Baldwin gives to those who would survive oppression, regardless of when or whether society erupts into the chaos and fire of bitter revolution.

Notes

[1] One scriptural passage which has been interpreted historically to imply the cursedness of being black is Genesis 9: 18-27 which recounts the story of Noah and his three sons---Shem, Ham, and Japheth. As recorded in this Genesis passage, some time after the flood when Noah and his family have rebuilt their lives, Noah becomes drunk and falls asleep naked in his tent. Noah's son Ham sees his father in the tent uncovered and goes to tell his brothers. These brothers, Shem and Japheth, go to Noah's tent and place a covering upon him, showing Noah the respect that Ham should have give him. Later, when Noah awakes, he learns what has happened and curses Ham's descendants, angered over Ham's disrespect. According to theologian Cain Hope Felder, some interpreters of scripture have identified Shem, Ham, and Japheth as the individuals from whom the various races of people originated, framing blacks, specifically, as Ham's descendants. Felder suggests that one of many problems with such an interpretation is that "The distinction the Old Testament makes [between Shem, Ham, and Japheth] is not racial. Rather, the Hebrew Scripture distinguishes groups on the basis of national identity and ethnic tribes. All who do not meet the criteria for salvation as defined by the ethnic or national 'in-groups' are relegated to an inferior status" (*Troubling Biblical Waters* 43).

[2] In the early 1960s, Elijah Muhammed invited James Baldwin to his home for dinner. In a conversation during that dinner, Baldwin notes the religious leader's proclamation that Allah was preparing blacks for the ultimate and soon-to-come destruction of the white world, a destruction meant to redeem blacks from white oppression. Baldwin responds to Muhammed by explaining how his view of the world and of race relations was different from that of the religion leader's:"I told Elijah that *I* did not care if white and black people

married, and that I had many white friends. I would have no choice, if it came to it, but to perish with them, for (I said to myself, but not to Elijah), 'I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?'" ("Down at the Cross" 363).

Baldwin's trouble with both Islamic theology as practiced by the Nation of Islam and with scriptural interpretations in Christianity based on racial assumptions was that, according to him, both of these interpretation of faith were narrow and sought, not the unity of human beings in love, but power, the ability of certain groups of human beings to force their will upon other groups: "as '[Islamic] theology goes, it was no more indigestible than the more familiar brand asserting that there is a curse on the sons of Ham. No more, and no less, and it has been designed for the same purpose; namely, the sanctification of power" ("Down at the Cross" 353).

[3] The interest shown by the African-American community and the black literary establishment in faiths other than Christianity is not meant to suggest that Christianity has lost its vibrancy among blacks. In fact, according to an August 2004 report by the Barna Group, a marketing research company in southern California that for over 15 years has provided information about the Christian church and American culture to major American companies, ". . .the African-American population is the segment with the most traditional Christian beliefs and practices." Data in the report was collected from two nationwide surveys of more than 2, 600 adults from January to May of 2004, and it aims to identify the religious beliefs and behaviors of four ethnic groups—whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. Of all the ethnic groups surveyed, 47 percents of blacks describe themselves a born-again Christians compared with 41 percent of whites, 29 percent of Hispanics, and 12 percent of

Asians. When compared with other ethnic groups, African Americans were at "the high end of religious activities [such as] reading the Bible, praying to God, giving money to churches and watching Christian television." African Americans were also, as the report says, "notably less likely than others to be unchurched" ("Ethnic Groups").

The truth of this latter point is borne out in part by the national recognition of African-American pastor T. D. Jakes, who made the cover of *Time* on September 17, 2001, a cover with the caption "Is This Man the Next Billy Graham?" (*Time Magazine Cover*). Jakes heads a non-denominational church known as The Potter's House, which is based in Dallas and has over 28,000 members. Of that number, 77 percent are African-American, 13 percent are Caucasian, and 7 percent are Asian (*The Potter's House*, 2004). According to Quinton Dixie, "the sanctuary [of The Potter's House] seats just over 8,000 and is equipped with computer jacks at every seat so parishioners can download sermons" (2003, 296). In June 2004, Jakes held what he called the MegaFest Christian conference, a four-day conference in Atlanta's Georgia Dome, World Congress Center, and Phillips Arena and that combined preaching sessions with family entertainment. Over 100,000 people attended the conference, coming from throughout the United States as well as from foreign countries (Kloer).

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