

White Church or World Community? James Baldwin's Challenging Discipleship

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There was no love in the church. The transfiguring power of the Holy Spirit ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door.

It's time to think about the Messiah in a new way. The love of God means responsibility to each other.

If you really love one person, you will love all people.

—James Baldwin

IN FEBRUARY 2017, SCOTT TIMBERG WROTE in the *Los Angeles Times* that “James Baldwin is not just a writer for the ages, but a scribe whose work speaks directly to ours.”¹ Witness the critically acclaimed movie *I Am Not Your Negro*, which narrates African American history from the Civil Rights to the Black Lives Matter movement, using Baldwin's voice and witness as guide. Responding to the recent exacerbation of police brutality, novelist Jesmyn Ward thus acknowledges the effect of Baldwin's voice and witness: “I needed to know that someone else saw the myriad injustices of living while black in this country, that someone so sharp and gifted and human could acknowledge it all. Baldwin is so brutally honest.”² Retrieving his critical analysis of American Christianity, as articulated in his address “White Racism or World Community?” published in October 1968 and a number of previous and subsequent essays, in what follows I will formulate the challenging invitation to faithful discipleship Baldwin makes to all Christians.

More precisely, I will allow James Baldwin to speak to white Christians as a trustworthy friend able to articulate in plain terms the hard truth, the truth enabling personal and communal transformation. For beyond the universal acclaim and praise Baldwin received (and continues to receive more than 30 years after his death) as a brilliant and challenging writer, debater and social critic, I surmise that his plea

¹ Scott Timberg, “30 Years after His Death, James Baldwin Is Having a New Pop Culture Moment,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2017, www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-james-baldwin-pop-culture-20170223-story.html.

² Jesmyn Ward, *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*, ed. J. Ward (New York: Scribner, 2016), 7.

and plight have yet to be heard by the Christian community and theologians in particular. In Christian circles, Baldwin is, more often than admitted, considered an outsider, perhaps even a deserter who left both country and church to preach the gospel of social transformation from a safe haven in southern France. Doubting the moral quality of his life, many Christians moreover fail to see any form of faithful witness to Jesus Christ in Baldwin's person, life, and writings. I dare to suggest that the careful consideration of Baldwin's message and witness are of critical importance to white Christians today, for if the Christian faith and community are to be relevant and a leaven of social transformation, it will be only because they open themselves and listen to the faith and hope of those who speak from the truth of their suffering at the hands of unjust social practices and structures.

Baldwin writes, speaks from, and ministers to his own experience of the pain caused by Christian oppression which, paradoxically, at the same time provides him with a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ, the suffering God. He knows that only a suffering God can and does save the oppressed, marginalized, and excluded, and he thus summons the Christian community to bear faithful witness to such a God. Exposing the true nature and effects of systemic racism, his eloquent testimony and witness can operate, in our day and age, as prophetic revelation granting renewed access to Christ and his transformative work. In David Leeming's apt words:

Baldwin was not a saint, he was not always psychologically or emotionally stable. But he was a prophet... Like Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Samuel, whose words and agonies he knew from his days as a child preacher in Harlem, he understood that as a witness he must often stand alone in anger against a nation that seemed intent on not "keeping the faith."³

Baldwin can therefore act as a sure guide leading "the white consciousness through the horrors of the black dilemma."⁴ The challenge here, for white Christians, is to acquire the moral formation and stance—a character and way of life forged and accomplished in and as complete conversion—that will enable us to hear the plea of our African American neighbors and follow Christ who saves and builds his body in and through our common humanity.

Baldwin urges white Christians to stop betraying Christ and the Gospel when they minister on Christ's behalf; the Church plagued by and permeated with the ideologies of racism, white privilege, and

³ David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), xii-xiii.

⁴ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 101.

white supremacy must be deconstructed. Baldwin summons Christians to leave their whiteness behind and access authentic humanity by joining African Americans with and through whom Christ is currently undergoing his passion. Moral maturity will be acquired at the cost of overcoming the fear of the other which generates and perpetuates itself through discriminating ideology and use of power. The way in and to Christ is, for white Christians, that of a humble response to the confronting love of African Americans. Baldwin's testimony and witness require lifelong conversion and engagement in transformative action as expressions of a life truly lived in accordance with the Gospel. Such conversion and action form the core of a Christian theology of discipleship for the twenty-first century.

FROM PREACHER TO PROPHET: THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES ADDRESS

Baldwin's opening words, pronounced before the World Council of Churches (which, in 1968, comprised diverse Protestant and Orthodox ecclesial bodies), speak for themselves: "I address you as one of the creatures, one of God's creatures, whom the Christian church has most betrayed."⁵ Baldwin accuses Christianity of no less than siding with white privilege and power and, thereby, of condoning the systematic oppression of African Americans, in complete disrespect of Jesus and the Gospel, both of which univocally assert the absolute dignity of all human beings. The church failed to act as a prophet denouncing the mistreatment of millions of American citizens at the hand of their fellow Americans. Distanced from their conscience, white Christians have lost sight of the humanity of their African American neighbors and of themselves.⁶

Baldwin's criticism of Christianity is not grounded in abstract ideas and claims, but rather directly emerges from and translates his personal experience of oppression, of the denegation of his own humanity (and that of his close relatives), which has universal implications. In this address, Baldwin speaks as a former non-ordained preacher and the stepson of a pastor (Baldwin never knew his biological father) of the Pentecostal Church who felt that despite all their efforts to be faithful ministers and followers of Christ, they never succeeded at and never were allowed to become full members of the church, because of the color of their skin. Baldwin bears witness to and produces the testimony of a voiceless condition.

I watched what the Christian church did to my father, who was in the pulpit all the years of his life, I watched the kind of hopeless poverty,

⁵ James Baldwin, "White Racism or World Community?" in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 749.

⁶ See Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 297.

which was not an act of God, but an act of the State, against which he and his children struggled, I watched above all, and this is what is crucial, the ways in which white power can destroy black minds, and what black people are now fighting against. We watched too many of us being destroyed for too long and destroyed where it really matters, not only in chain gangs, and in prisons and on needles.... Every black person knows, hundreds of people, thousands of people, perishing in the streets of my nation as we stand here, perishing, for whom there is no hope.⁷

Taking a closer look at the life and ministry of Baldwin's stepfather sheds light on the personal destruction to which Baldwin refers. James perceived his stepfather as an awesome preacher filled with and broken down by deep bitterness, which translated into anger and violence expressed toward his wife and children.⁸ The older James Baldwin understands that part of the bitterness and violence his stepfather felt and inflicted was kindled by the clear awareness of the dehumanization he, his wife, and children were subjected to and against which he could not protect them. The son of a slave, David Baldwin migrated from Louisiana to New York, only to end up living a life of misery combining low income factory work and pastoring congregations in storefront fundamentalist Pentecostal churches in Harlem. His income could barely support his nine children. James Campbell gives a vivid description of the churches in which David Baldwin (and James) ministered:

Harlem streets today are as full of churches with colourful names as they were fifty years ago: the Little Widow's Mite Church, the Holy Ghost Pentecostal Church, the Revival Time Pentecostal House of Prayer, the Rock Church, the Holy Tabernacle Church, Church of the Holy Agony, etc. Some are above shops, others in basements; all but a few look like anything but a church—like a sweetshop or a warehouse or a take-away. These churches are a direct transplant from the rural districts of the pre-First World War segregated South, and their religion is the fundamentalist Protestant sect called Pentecostalism. Among its practices and beliefs are faith healing, speaking in tongues and a ritual which in black churches is known as "pleading the blood," a state of rapture characterized by trance as a prelude to salvation.⁹

Family time at the Baldwin home was not exactly joyful. As Baldwin recalls: "He was not a young man when we were growing up and he had already suffered many kinds of ruin.... I do not remember, in all those years, that one of his children was ever glad to see him come

⁷ Baldwin, "White Racism or World Community?" 753–54.

⁸ See Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, in *Collected Essays*, 64.

⁹ James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 8.

home.”¹⁰ With the passing of his stepfather in 1943, Baldwin (then eighteen years old) had to take over the latter’s parental responsibilities, which quickly made him realize he had inherited from him a bitterness snipping away life and ultimately leaving one alone and ruined.

We went from church to smaller and more improbable church, he found himself in less and less demand as a minister, and by the time he died none of his friends had come to see him for a long time. He had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit and it frightened me, as we drove him to the graveyard through those unquiet, ruined streets, to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realize that this bitterness was now mine.¹¹

The ongoing process of personal destruction consuming his stepfather and by extension his family did not prevent Baldwin from being positively influenced by Christianity and the liturgical life of the Church. In the latter, he experienced conversion. The older Baldwin’s words are in this regard quite revealing: “I am speaking as an ex-minister of the Gospel, and, therefore, as one of the born again. I was instructed to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit those in prison. I am far indeed from my youth, and from my father’s house, but I have not forgotten these instructions, and I pray upon my soul that I never will.”¹² During an evening liturgical service he attended (similar to a great many others in which he had taken part before) Baldwin underwent a life-changing experience.

One night, when this woman [the officiating pastor] had finished preaching, everything came roaring, screaming, crying out, and I fell to the ground before the altar. It was the strangest sensation I have ever had in my life—up to that time, or since. I had not known that it was going to happen, or that it could happen. One moment I was on my feet, singing and clapping and, at the same time, working out in my head the plot of a play I was working on then; the next moment, with no transition, no sensation of falling, I was on my back with the lights beating down into my face and all the vertical saints above me. ... Over me, to bring me “through,” the saints sang and rejoiced and prayed. And in the morning, when they raised me, they told me that I was “saved.”¹³

Redeemed, Baldwin felt relief from the bitterness and guilt he had been carrying inside him for quite some time. Salvation, however, did not protect him from his proneness to getting bored, which, in turn,

¹⁰ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 64–65.

¹¹ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 65.

¹² Baldwin, “Open Letter to the Born Again,” in *Collected Essays*, 784.

¹³ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, in *Collected Essays*, 304–5.

led him to seek involvement in ecclesial ministry. The prospect of besting his stepfather on his own ground also formed a powerful incentive to devote himself to liturgical service. Non-ordained preaching ministry proved to be quite exhilarating for the writer in formation. The not-so-noble motivations driving him to embrace this ministry did not prevent Baldwin from experiencing authentic communion with Jesus and the gathered community. Jesus was a friend in the presence of whom he could learn about himself:

Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I know that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, “the Word,” when the church and I were one. ... I rushed home from school, to the church, to the altar, to be alone there, to commune with Jesus, my dearest Friend, who would never fail me, who knew all the secrets of my heart.¹⁴

For three years (from ages fourteen to seventeen), Baldwin preached the Gospel with inspiration to a participating congregation. Randall Kenan thus describes Baldwin’s approach to and preparation for preaching: “Relying on his knowledge of the Bible and on divine inspiration—the spirit speaking directly to the congregation through the instrument of the minister—rather than on a written text, he preached every Sunday and sometimes during the week.”¹⁵ The office of preacher (and the authority associated to it) loosened the shackles placed on him by his father and allowed him to take some needed reflective distance from his condition of poor African American, which in turn granted him with a new perspective on life.

Concurrently, he could not avoid noticing the huge discrepancy existing between the content of his officiating colleagues’ sermons and the moral quality of their actions. Baldwin recalls:

There was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair. The transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door. When we were told to love everybody, I had thought that that meant everybody. But no. It applied only to those who believed as we did, and it did not apply to white people at all.¹⁶

More and more, Baldwin was led to question the authenticity and legitimacy of their and his own ministry.

The preaching ministry was revelatory for himself, not only for those to whom he ministered. This ministry triggered and led him to a

¹⁴ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 306.

¹⁵ Randall Kenan, *James Baldwin* (New York: Chelsea House, 1994), 35–36.

¹⁶ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 309–10.

moment of truth. The connection with the members of the congregation demanded a level of personal investment and exposition (vulnerable openness) preventing deception.¹⁷ He needed to preach so as to be able to take a distance from himself and acquire a more comprehensive sense of his own wounded condition. The church and his conversion and redemption had profoundly transformed him, but he grew aware of the fact that he had not been fully (if at all) healed. He would spend his entire life trying to learn to live with open wounds.

LOOKING FOR CHRIST OUTSIDE THE CHURCH: BALDWIN'S DISCIPLESHIP FROM THE MARGINS

Baldwin wishes to claim that white Christians are not and cannot be Christians, because they long ago ceased being human. Baldwin denounces the fact that Christianity bears a very significant burden of responsibility for the past and present plight of African Americans. White Christians learn to behave as if widespread and enduring unjustified discrimination enjoyed the status of law of nature. "When I was discovered and brought away to be used like an animal, the Christian church had to conspire with itself to say that I preferred slavery to my own condition and that I really liked the role I played in Western culture."¹⁸ Baldwin's rhetorical identification with his ancestors unveils the existence of an organic connection tying the current plight of African Americans to that of those who experienced slavery firsthand. When considered from the standpoint of Baldwin's own fleshed out humanity, the horrors of slavery and racism become patent. The re-writing of (long) past events no longer dilutes the dehumanization to which the victims of slavery were subjected. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin had already used rhetorical identification to show, with powerful words, how deeply Christian oppression impacted his own existence.

I am called Baldwin because I was either sold by my African tribe or kidnapped out of it into the hands of a white Christian named Baldwin, who forced me to kneel at the foot of the cross. I am, then, both visibly and legally the descendant of slaves in a white, Protestant country, and this is what it means to be an American Negro, this is who he is—a kidnapped pagan, who was sold like an animal and treated like one, who was once defined by the American Constitution as "three-fifths" of a man, and who, according to the Dred Scott decision, had no rights that a white man was bound to respect.¹⁹

¹⁷ See the printout of the interview Baldwin gave to Quincy Troupe during the final year of his life: "The Last Interview," in *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, ed. Q. Troupe (New York: Touchstone, 1989), 194–96.

¹⁸ Baldwin, "White Racism or World Community?" 751.

¹⁹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 335.

A basic principle undergirds this rhetorical turn: racism does not de-humanize only its victims, but also its perpetrators, because there is only one humanity, fully embodied in each and every human person:

The glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another—or others—always has been and always will be a recipe for murder. There is no way around it. 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.... Whoever debases others is debasing himself.²⁰

To follow Jesus Christ, one must first fully assume one's humanity, for Jesus is God incarnate, that is, God who reveals Godself in and as authentic human existence. Embracing Christ as God entails recognizing the equal and absolute dignity of all human beings, acknowledging oneself as member of the unique human community created and fulfilled in him. To deny the humanity of any person entails denying one's own humanity and God's revelation and redemption as and of the human person. Being human entails embracing one's freedom and responsibility for human history as one receives, embodies, and hands it on. Human freedom and agency cannot be delegated to others who will save us despite, from, or for ourselves. There is no set of moral laws (be it human or divine) that takes away the task and challenge of becoming oneself, of bringing one's human potential to fruition by oneself in the entangled and tainted web of relationships that is human history. If they are to die and be risen with Christ, white Christians must first live lives of their own, not prefabricated lives imposed upon them by others, not even and especially the church.

We are responsible for our soul's salvation, not the bishop, not the priest, not my mother, ultimately it is each man's [sic] responsibility alone in his own chamber before his own gods to deal with his health and sickness, to deal with his life and his death. When people cannot do this with themselves, they very quickly cannot do it with others. When one begins to live by habit and by quotation, one has begun to stop living.²¹

Following Baldwin, humans are by God in Christ entrusted and empowered to save one another. No individual can save herself, but she can save and be saved by someone else. The incarnation of God in Jesus means and entails that human salvation is both an embodied and relational experience where dependence on and vulnerability to the humanity of others is clearly affirmed.²²

²⁰ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 334.

²¹ Baldwin, "White Racism or World Community?" 755–56.

²² See Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," in *Collected Essays*, 700.

Baldwin intimates that white Christians are free and ought to change their perspective and stance on human salvation, especially their own. Baldwin's claim is that no one can pretend to have been given a definitive guarantee of salvation. No one possesses the truth in whole, fully unpacked. The God of Jesus Christ cannot be owned, as a treasure to be shared with others only after access to it has been secured. Christians and the church can only teach Christ as they themselves learn about and from him. The willingness to and the act of reclaiming his right to stand before God by and for himself—this is precisely that to which Baldwin's life bears witness. For him, the church had become the community of those who were unable to follow Christ and live in the spirit of the Gospel.²³ Baldwin declared the testimony of Christianity "invalid," and went about looking for Christ outside the church, wherever He could be found and followed with integrity. Baldwin is not accusing the church from outside, for he speaks as a former Pentecostal non-ordained minister who experienced firsthand the fallacy of his own preaching and testimony. His own conscience was calling him to account.

Baldwin looked for more faithful ways of following Christ than explicit membership and ministry in the church. Leaving the church and ministry formed what faithful discipleship to Christ demanded of him. About ten years later (in 1979), Baldwin thus reflected back on this momentous decision: "I abandoned the ministry in order not to betray myself by betraying the ministry."²⁴ Baldwin could no longer officiate and act as representative for Christ in a church where the God of infinite love he was preaching did not exist in action, in the lived existence of the community. He was coming to terms with the ghastly truth that Christians had taught him what being despised and loathed felt like, and he willingly refused to be a channel for further hatred. Deep down, Baldwin knew that the only way out of the cycle and circle of oppression is the long way of forgiveness and love. "My own oppression," he ponders, "did not ennoble me.... I know how it feels to be hated. I learned this from Christians, and I ceased to practice what the Christians practiced."²⁵

Baldwin therefore gave up official church membership, faith practice, and ministry not because he repudiated, but rather because he wanted to find Christ, not because he did not believe in the Gospel, but rather because he wanted to join a community that truly attempts to live it out, and not because he no longer felt called to do ministry, but rather precisely because he was summoned to challenge all Americans (Christians included) to be faithful. Baldwin needed to go out in

²³ See Baldwin, "White Racism or World Community?" 750.

²⁴ Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket," in *Collected Essays*, 838.

²⁵ Baldwin, "Negroes are Anti-Semitic because They're Anti-White," in *Collected Essays*, 748.

search of Christ, that is, of the God who truly becomes incarnate and effectively humanizes individuals and communities. Christian discipleship is defined in and by the act of following Christ. Insofar as he opens and leads the way to be walked after himself, Christ always remains distinct from and ahead of those (their ideas, ways of being and doing) who follow him. Faithful Christians must look for, find and follow Christ wherever he leads them—that is, to places and communities unknown to them. The Christ Baldwin looked for was not the Christ he had been taught, for that Christ was white and did not relate to him. The humanity that Christ embodied and the Kingdom he promised did not speak to and include Baldwin's black humanity.²⁶

The Christ Baldwin looked for resembled more a "disreputable Hebrew criminal" coming to trigger a revolution which would profoundly transform religious practices and institutions, break down distinctions of social, cultural, and political status to enable humankind to form a unique community, the *ekklesia*, enjoying covenantal intimacy with God. This Christ reaches out to those who suffer undeservedly, fully acknowledges their humanity, lives among them, and struggles with them for liberation. This Christ reaches out also to those who suffer deservedly and offers them boundless forgiveness and mercy. He challenges them to reclaim their humanity by taking responsibility for what they have done personally and as members of a living community and history. Embracing their humanity, their eyes will be opened and they will see Christ in person again or, perhaps, for the first time. The quest for Christ identifies with the quest for authentic humanity. To meet Christ, one must take on and bear the cross that is one's humanity.

Baldwin challenges all nations of Christendom, at last, to hear and heed Jesus' call to repentance and conversion. "The plea was articulated by Jesus Christ himself, who said, 'Insofar as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me'" (Matthew 25:40).²⁷ Like the Christ they profess to believe in, Christians must now live, stand, and suffer with and for the victims of discrimination on the basis of race. They must refrain from denying the humanity of their African American neighbors as when they consider them "a creation of the Christian conscience, an object of missionary charity, something to be manipulated or defined by others."²⁸ For this to happen, they must first learn to live, stand, and suffer with and for themselves. Until white Christians overcome their fear of the African American other, grounded in their guilt, that is, in their fear of having to give an account for their involvement (direct and indirect) in the current plight of African Americans, which in turn boils down to a deeply entrenched fear

²⁶ See Baldwin, "White Racism or World Community?" 749–50.

²⁷ Baldwin, "White Racism or World Community?" 749.

²⁸ Baldwin, "White Racism or World Community?" 753.

of their own humanity as it really is, there will not be authentic Christianity in the United States. White Christians must acquire the moral maturity needed to be able to take the risk of setting themselves free by recognizing in full the freedom of their African American neighbors. Authentic humanity makes itself vulnerable to become an integral part of the one human community. In Baldwin's own words:

One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself—that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving. And, after all, one can give freedom only by setting someone free. This, in the case of the Negro, the American republic has never become sufficiently mature to do.²⁹

Until white Christians allow themselves to see through what Baldwin aptly names “the curtain of color,” they will not be able to understand that the distance separating them from their African American neighbors reflects and corresponds to the distance they have set between themselves and their own humanity.³⁰ In “The White Problem,” a short essay published four years before he gave his World Council of Churches address, Baldwin makes one of his most daring claims. In his view, white America created the so-called “nigger” for the purpose of using him as a screen onto which it could project its own fears, suffering and anger.

The nigger is a white invention, and white people invented him out of terrible necessities of their own.... What it means to be a Negro in this country is that you represent, you are the receptacle of and the vehicle of, all the pain, disaster, sorrow which white Americans think they can escape. This is what is really meant by keeping the Negro in his place. It is why white people, until today, are still astounded and offended if, by some miscalculation, they are forced to suspect that you are not happy where they have placed you.³¹

The forceful imposition and ensuing appropriation of this constructed identity on and by millions of human beings is not without dramatic consequences: murderous hatred rages (with good reason) inside the African American heart. Baldwin speaks from personal experience, an experience he knows to be shared by many.

There is, I should think, no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees and to varying effect, simple, naked and unanswerable hatred;

²⁹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 336.

³⁰ See Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt,” in *Collected Essays*, 725.

³¹ Baldwin, “The White Problem,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. R. Kenan (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 78–79.

who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruelest vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all white people and bring them low, as low as that dust into which he himself has been and is being trampled; no Negro, finally, who has not had to make his own precarious adjustment to the “nigger” who surrounds him and to the “nigger” in himself.³²

Life under oppressing ideology is life under direct threat, and life constantly under threat is a life most threatening. As they exercise oppression, oppressors create (give birth to and fashion) the principle of their own destruction.

One key component of the African American drama lies in the fact that within African American hearts and souls live both the oppressor and her victim. Baldwin testifies of this grim truth:

I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.³³

The hatred that burns in African American hearts and souls is but the fruit and expression of the fear and hatred white Americans (and Christians in particular) feel and display toward African Americans. Baldwin argues that this fear and hatred reveals an underlying need to be recognized as who they truly are:

A vast amount of energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man's equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror.³⁴

RACISM AS THEOLOGY: THE CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF WHITE SUPREMACY

Recent research on racial attitudes and the relationship of religion to racism supports Baldwin's insightful analysis of American social dynamics. D. R. Williams thus reports the following findings:

Decades of research on racial attitudes in the U.S. confirms the fact that there is more racial prejudice in the Christian church than outside

³² Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 29.

³³ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 72.

³⁴ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 341.

it, that church members are more prejudiced than non-members, that churchgoers are more biased than those who do not attend, and that regular attenders are more prejudiced than those who attend less often. It's also been shown that persons who hold conservative theological beliefs are more likely to be prejudiced than those who do not.³⁵

The existence of greater racial prejudice within Christian communities itself reflects and results from the fact that modern racism is the child of cultures and societies profoundly influenced by the Christian faith. "In all its Western forms," observes Iain S. Maclean, "racism emerged from deeply Christian societies and, in most cases, with the church playing an ambiguous role in both contributing to such racisms as well as protesting them."³⁶ Enoch H. Oglesby has moreover shown that racial prejudice and racism are embedded in cultural systems in which they act as "the center of meaning and value," relegating "all other questions in the political-economic or the religio-cultural spheres" to secondary and incidental status, indicating that over and beyond being a social problem, racism "also is a theological one."³⁷

The previous observations invite one further inference: racial (white) supremacy in Western cultures and societies reflects and emerges from a form of supremacy inherent to Christianity itself. James W. Perkinson explains:

Christian supremacy is the real birth-mother and ardent tutor of modern white supremacy in all of its subsequent permutations and combinations with class and gender differences.... Its first form was theological, emerging as the bastard offspring of the "Great Chain of Being" thinking in the early modern European suppression of indigenous religious practice around the globe, in which all of reality was organized in a hierarchical scheme of evaluation, from top to bottom, with God at the apex, European Christians presiding over all other human communities in the middle just below angels and saints, and natives, Africans, and animals anchoring the lowest rung.³⁸

History has demonstrated that the pretension to universal validity and application inherent to such a racially-biased and theologically-grounded worldview has highly detrimental practical implications.

³⁵ David R. Williams, "The Right Thing to Do: A Divided Church and What to Do about It," *Adventist Review* 174 (1997): 24.

³⁶ Iain S. Maclean, "Dangerous Memories, Daring Documents, and the Demands of Discipleship: The Christian Church, Racism, and Racial Justice," *Missiology* 32, no. 1 (2004): 16.

³⁷ Enoch H. Oglesby, "Reflections on Cultural Racism: The Theoretical Task of the Black Ethicist," *Journal of the Interdenominational Center* 3, no. 1 (1975): 46–47.

³⁸ James W. Perkinson, "How I Came to Be Christened 'Bird': Christian Baptism, White Racism, and Theological Passion in the 21st Century," *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 4 (2011): 614.

The forceful imposition of the Christian faith, vision, and values by colonizing Western nations has led to the decimation of numerous religions, cultures, and populations. Traci C. West thus reports that

There is an extensive historical legacy of Christians violently imposing their beliefs on Jews, Muslims, and various indigenous populations who were practicing their own religious traditions before encountering Christians. This widespread legacy of coercion has included an assertion of the universality of Christianity for everyone, everywhere, interpreted to mean Christian superiority over other religions. This sense of superiority has justified Christian subjugation and even extermination of peoples.³⁹

M. Shawn Copeland articulates in plain terms the extreme implications of Christian supremacy for indigenous peoples and African Americans (genocide and slavery): “In the Americas, the effort to master beings by force nearly exterminated indigenous peoples and dehumanized Africans. In the highly profitable commodification of flesh, the specious union of colonial and ecclesiastical power decidedly abused religion and the religious.”⁴⁰ The prevalence of “anti-black logics” translated into concrete measures directly impacting the life of individuals and communities, such as “the establishment of segregated parishes, schools, and, in some cases, cemeteries; the denial, exclusion, and prohibition of black bodies from religious vows and from priesthood; and the proscription of black religious expression, culture, and spirituality.”⁴¹

In the post-civil rights era, racism and white supremacy take more subtle and covert forms, adapted to a social environment which pretends, at least in its public rhetoric, to affirm the equality of all persons and be supportive of cultural diversity. The result of this adaptation to new social conditions is a modified social “hierarchy” where whiteness still acts as normative standard. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes this social typology in greater detail:

The United States is developing a loose tri-racial stratification system with *whites* at the top, an intermediary group of *honorary whites* (similar to the middle racial strata in Latin America and the Caribbean), and a nonwhite group, or the *collective black*, at the bottom.... The white group will include “traditional” whites; new “white” immigrants; and in the near future, assimilated Latinos, some multiracials (light-skinned), and individual members of other groups (some Asian-

³⁹ Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 37.

⁴⁰ M. Shawn Copeland, “Anti-Blackness and White Supremacy in the Making of American Catholicism,” *American Catholic Studies* 127, no. 3 (2016): 7.

⁴¹ Copeland, “Anti-Blackness,” 8.

Americans, etc.). We predict the intermediate racial group will comprise most light-skinned Latinos (e.g., most Cubans and segments of the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities), ... Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, the bulk of multiracials ... and most Middle Eastern Americans. Finally, the collective black will include blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and maybe Filipinos.⁴²

Under this particular structuring of American society, whiteness still operates, as Kevin P. Considine accurately notes, as

a means of organizing the political sphere into social groups that exist in a kind of hierarchy connected to, but not fully determined by, phenotype. Depending upon the degree to which a person enters into this social space and begins to conform to (and to become deformed by) whiteness, we receive a greater proportion of access to opportunities for life-enhancement often called "white privilege."⁴³

The intended purpose of this reconfiguration of American social dynamics is the preservation of the privileges enjoyed by those individuals and communities falling under the category of "white." The new system allows for the introduction of a certain level of "color-blindness," reflected in the additional category of "honorary white," which helps maintain the discriminatory distribution of opportunities and resources through apparent openness to cultural diversity. As a result, Considine further argues,

Whites continue to find their life possibilities enhanced, and others find theirs diminished, by racialization. Some contemporary consequences of this history include alarmingly high incarceration rates, educational inequality, lack of access to safe and decent housing, greater likelihood of bodily harm at the hands of law-enforcement officials, and spiritual mutilation through internalized inferiority that often leads to lateral violence amongst black peoples.⁴⁴

To circumvent the inference of a direct correlation between financial status and racial affiliation of the form "white equals rich, black equals poor," Shannon Sullivan most appropriately distinguishes "white priority" from "white privilege." Racial priority refers to the fact that whiteness benefits all individuals and communities recognized as

⁴² Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Black, Honorary White, White: The Future of Race in the United States," in *Mixed Messages: Multiracial Identities in the "Color Blind" Era*, ed. D. L. Brunsma (London: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 33–34.

⁴³ Kevin P. Considine, "To Resist the Gravity of Whiteness: Communicating Racialized Suffering and Creating Paschal Community through an *Analogia Vulneris*," *Black Theology* 15, no. 2 (2017): 141.

⁴⁴ Considine, "To Resist the Gravity of Whiteness," 140.

“white” by not setting additional obstacles on their way to self-accomplishment and prosperity. White privilege denotes positive advantages obtained from the sheer fact that someone is categorized as “white.” While white privilege describes accurately the condition only of those whose life has been made easier and more comfortable on account of their racial affiliation, white priority connotes the fact that all people endowed with the quality of whiteness do not have to cope with further challenges in life, as is the case for all those who are not so endowed.⁴⁵

The main difficulty and challenge with white priority and its undergirding notion of whiteness has to do with the fact that they are invisible to those who benefit from and embody them. Reflecting on observations made during workshops on racial diversity he offered on university campuses, Reggie Williams concludes:

Whiteness functions as a social-political organizing norm, arranging all of humanity according to proximity to the template of the ideal white human. Yet it remains invisible to most white people, so whites struggle especially hard to describe it.... The power of white-as-normal is so common that it regulates social and political structures, often without participants recognizing that they are its willing disciples. White-as-normal shapes what is believed to be civilized behavior.⁴⁶

White individuals and communities in Western societies are doubly ignorant (to use a phrase and concept coined by Plato): they are unaware of their inability to perceive (their own) racism. This double ignorance, stemming from a long history of denial and induced oblivion, prevents them from attempting to struggle against and overcome it. Terrance MacMullan explains:

There is a long history of white avoidance, amnesia and ignorance regarding white racism and privilege ... Whiteness and white privilege are so intrinsically bound up with so much unearned and unjust privilege and advantage for those able to fit within the category as well as generating so much misery for all those beyond its pale that it almost inevitably generates a kind of mass delusion among white people.... White folks are the last people to get that white supremacy still adversely affects the lives of people of color here and around the world.⁴⁷

Whiteness as ideal becomes visible to whites only when they refrain from living and acting as if it defined human nature and existence

⁴⁵ Shannon Sullivan, “White Priority,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5, no. 2 (2017): 177.

⁴⁶ Reggie Williams, “Seeing Whiteness: Exercises in Understanding Race,” *Christian Century* 133, no. 15 (2016): 23, 25.

⁴⁷ Terrance MacMullan, “Facing up to Ignorance and Privilege: Philosophy of Whiteness as Public Intellectualism,” *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 9 (2015): 651.

in normative fashion.⁴⁸ For such counter-performance and action to be possible, racial counter-narratives and counter-education are required. Western education—that is, allegedly, formation to mature citizenship exercised in the context of advanced democratic societies—is thoroughly white. Following Kathy Hytten and Ameer Adkins, when

Critically investigating our practices in schools, we begin to see that what is meaningful is white, and what is irrelevant is nonwhite. The stories we tell in school are white (Columbus discovered America, and the Explorers tamed the savages), the practices we abide by and transmit are white (individual achievement, success through competition; knowledge as rational, scientific, and objective); and the students who do well are—white.⁴⁹

Hytten and Adkins believe that the true recognition of one's whiteness is made possible through empathetic engagement with those who are victimized by it. Refraining from diagnosing or speaking on behalf of nonwhites, white persons and educators begin to measure the impact of their way of life by listening to nonwhites' alternative life experiences and narratives.⁵⁰ Empathetic listening prepares for constructive dialogue in and by which white students and educators are challenged "to dig deeply into their taken-for-granted cultural experiences, and ultimately, be open to the possibility that their beliefs may change."⁵¹

The alteration of one's faith system must moreover induce a similar transformation of the believer's way of life. Genuine faith comes to explicit manifestation in discipleship. For this fundamental reason, as she attempts to construct a liberative Christian ethics, Traci C. West argues that white Christian communities must come to appreciate and distinguish the privileges they receive from social conditions and structures unjustly benefiting them from the privileges they receive as undeserved gifts from God to enable them to serve their community and society.⁵² The fruit of this discernment process will be corrective behavior whereby white individuals and communities actively relinquish undue privileges and offer proportionate compensations to individuals and communities detrimentally affected by the fact that they have enjoyed such privileges.⁵³ Andre C. Willis further observes that this challenge of education of white Americans and Christians to perceive and struggle against their own whiteness must be met in a context where "Obama's two-term presidency [has] elevated the power of

⁴⁸ See Willie J. Jennings, "Whiteness isn't Progress: How the Missionary Project Went Horrifically Wrong," *Christian Century* 135, no. 23 (2018): 31.

⁴⁹ Kathy Hytten and Ameer Adkins, "Thinking through a Pedagogy of Whiteness," *Educational Theory* 51, no. 4 (2002): 440.

⁵⁰ Hytten and Adkins, "Thinking through a Pedagogy of Whiteness," 449.

⁵¹ Hytten and Adkins, "Thinking through a Pedagogy of Whiteness," 446.

⁵² West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 119.

⁵³ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 138.

whiteness (described as the invisible and singular source of American norms) and thus increased the difficulty of Black progressives to discursively frame their conditions and actively protest to improve them.”⁵⁴ Willis even dares to claim that “having a black president has diminished the capacity of Black masses to mobilize domestically and undermined their sense of global connectedness.”⁵⁵

Reaching to the very roots of racial discrimination in the United States, Willie J. Jennings asserts that lured by and imbued with colonizing power, Christian settlers simply forgot the fundamental fact that Christians are Gentiles who received revelation from another people: the Israelites. In Jennings’ powerful words:

Christians got tired of remembering that they were a thinking margin that had been included in Israel’s promise.... Without a sense of the reality of being Gentiles growing and expanding in and with us, we declared that the biblical story was simply about the church and Christians and their destiny—in other words, all about us.... We should have seen ourselves as those who always understood what life was like from the margins, who understood what it meant to be an outsider, and who lived in ways that are always inclusive, built on an abiding humility and a sense of grace. We would have understood that becoming Christian meant a permanent opening of our identities toward those whom God would send into our lives, because it was exactly that opening that made us Christian in the first place.⁵⁶

In circumstances where there is widespread resistance from white Americans and Christians to acknowledge the reality of whiteness and allow nonwhite individuals and communities to have a voice and a social-political agency of their own, it seems all the more appropriate to listen to and follow Baldwin, whose prophetic voice and witness have in the past succeeded and still succeed today at providing white audiences with a mirror challengingly reflecting their condition back to themselves.⁵⁷ His prophetic message and ministry from the margins of white American society and Christianity can provide guidance and assistance as white Americans and Christians attempt to reconnect with the spirit of the longstanding and continually evolving Judeo-Christian tradition. His personal experience of the African American “exodus” and his situation of outsider within American society and

⁵⁴ Andre C. Willis, “Obama’s Racial Legacy: The Power of Whiteness,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5, no. 2 (2017): 184.

⁵⁵ Willis, “Obama’s Racial Legacy,” 195.

⁵⁶ Willie J. Jennings, “Overcoming Racial Faith,” *Divinity* 14, no. 2 (2015): 6–7.

⁵⁷ Baldwin has been accused, among other things, of speaking “too eagerly and too exclusively to white America” at a time (the 1960s) where black people were “in need of a revolution” (Consuela Francis, “Reading and Theorizing James Baldwin: A Bibliographical Essay,” *James Baldwin Review* 1 [2015]: 183). Baldwin’s ability to reach and affect white audiences never was in doubt.

Christianity enable him to open up and guide white audiences to and through the nonwhite African American experience.

THE ARTIST AS MINISTER: CREATING A CHURCH OF TRANSFORMATIVE ENCOUNTER

The time has come for Christianity to subject itself to thorough self-examination, to question the nature and quality of the witness it bears to Christ, and muster the courage necessary to receive a truth and work at transforming a reality that might not be so easy to bear and change. Baldwin challenges Christianity to cease defining itself implicitly or explicitly as “white,” and encounter, at long last, the humanity of African Americans. Baldwin invites white Christians to believe in and give themselves over to the kind of love—embodied in Christ—that opposes and overcomes all forms of division. Accompanied and empowered by Christ, African Americans speak from the authority of their experience of unjustifiable suffering. In Baldwin’s crystal-clear words: “The authority of my countrymen in these matters is not equal to my own, since I know what black Americans endure—know it in my own flesh and spirit, know it by the human wreckage through which I have passed.”⁵⁸

African Americans speak with authority because they must make meaning out of shattered lives, because they face the impossible challenge of defining positive human existence and identity in social conditions designed to prevent them from doing so. “Unshakable authority comes only from having looked on and endured and survived the worst.”⁵⁹ To survive and live as human persons, African Americans must find meaning as they live with and through the suffering unjustly and systematically inflicted upon them. They must turn the suffering they should never have been subjected to into a medium for the authentic manifestation (revelation) of self, others, and God. African Americans must learn to bear the cross their lives have been turned into by others in the hope of rising above and beyond racism toward and for true humanity and community. Baldwin’s transformative understanding of suffering is profoundly Christian.

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 human 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. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning

⁵⁸ Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 430.

⁵⁹ Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” in *Collected Essays*, 671.

behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne.⁶⁰

In Baldwin's lexicon, the word "revelation" thus refers to the recognition of existing injustices enabling the struggle for their overcoming. In this unjust world, the manifestation of the truth inevitably induces transformative discipleship and action.⁶¹

Baldwin longed for a freedom not only and simply found in battle against systemic discrimination and injustice. He craved the freedom enjoyed by those whose humanity is fully recognized and enjoyed in peace. Baldwin did not feel at home anywhere in this world. His homeland was not a safe haven; he could find no rest there. "In America," he relates, "I was free only in battle, never free to rest—and he who finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle."⁶² To him, the culture of violence permeating American life bespoke of a profound inability to love, for love affirms and honors the individual.⁶³ He went through life, always sick at heart, looking for a place where he would be allowed to be himself authentically and uncompromisingly. The necessary struggle and witness for the recognition of his humanity—condition of his survival—turned into a sacred exodus, to which the older Baldwin could see no end. For him, the transformative search for self led into and beyond death.⁶⁴

Baldwin never ceased to believe in and hope for a "miracle of love," which he considered to be the only experience and reality capable of inducing the transformation white Americans (and Christians in particular) need to undergo if a new and real humanity is to emerge from the relentless death generated by racism. He hoped for and attempted to live out a

love strong enough to guide or drive one into the great estate of maturity, or, to put it another way, into the apprehension and acceptance of one's own identity. For some deep and ineradicable instinct—I believe—causes us to know that it is only this passionate achievement which can outlast death, which can cause life to spring from death.⁶⁵

He believed in the resurrection of love, overcoming the power of widespread and systemic evil, giving birth to authentic human community and communion. For him, love is "a state of being, a state of grace"

⁶⁰ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 343.

⁶¹ See William J. Weatherby, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1989), 42.

⁶² Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 430.

⁶³ Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 699.

⁶⁴ See Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket," 841.

⁶⁵ Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 701.

which he understood “in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”⁶⁶ The active presence of God he thus perceived in and through gratuitous “mercy, forgiveness, compassion, justice—grace that filled his heart and soul with overwhelming desire for more grace, more joy.”⁶⁷ The challenge that is and leads to authentic human existence demands unshakable faith in the fact that the light of truth can be found and followed even and especially in the midst of the current social darkness.⁶⁸

In this fundamental respect, though living and ministering from outside the confines of the official church, Baldwin was and remained a faithful Christian to which all those who profess to believe in and follow Christ ought to listen carefully. He felt himself endowed with the mission of authoritatively professing and bearing witness to the truth revealed to him in suffering, as part of the socially marginalized and systematically dehumanized African American community. “I am a witness. In the church in which I was raised you were supposed to bear witness to the truth.”⁶⁹ Baldwin invites white Christians to expand their understanding of the church to include those who are excluded and with whom Jesus Christ lives. Not unlike the biblical figure of John the Baptist, he summons his fellow humans to repent and prepare for a transformative encounter with the God of Israel. “If I were still in the pulpit,” writes Baldwin, “which some people (and they may be right) claim I never left, I would counsel my countrymen to the self-confrontation of prayer, the cleansing breaking of the heart which precedes atonement.”⁷⁰ His lifelong quest for faithful understanding of God and discipleship in light of and in the context of the African American plight undoubtedly establishes Baldwin as a “theological writer.”⁷¹

STRONGER THAN DEATH: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND THE MINISTRY OF LOVE

Baldwin invites his fellow humans to work at creating a new (American) humanity formed and bound by love. Writing to his nephew, he says: “We, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America

⁶⁶ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 341.

⁶⁷ Josiah U. Young III, *James Baldwin's Understanding of God: Overwhelming Desire and Joy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 42.

⁶⁸ Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” 704.

⁶⁹ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 367.

⁷⁰ Baldwin, “The Price of the Ticket,” 839.

⁷¹ Michael F. Lynch, “Just above My Head: James Baldwin's Quest for Belief,” *Literature and Theology* 11, no. 3 (1997): 290.

what America must become.”⁷² He found a paradigmatic embodiment of this new humanity in the person, life, and ministry of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1961, Baldwin thus described the achievements and vocation of the famed leader of the civil rights movement:

Martin Luther King, Jr., by the power of his personality and the force of his beliefs, has injected a new dimension into our ferocious struggle. He has succeeded, in a way no Negro before him has managed to do, to carry the battle into the individual heart and make its resolution the province of the individual will. He has made it a matter, on both sides of the racial fence, of self-examination; and has incurred, therefore, the grave responsibility of continuing to lead in the path he has encouraged so many people to follow.⁷³

With Rev. King, the struggle against racism enters the heart and becomes the responsibility of each and every human person. No one can avoid assessing one's own involvement in the systemic injustice victimizing all nonwhite individuals and communities. There can be no overcoming of racism without thorough personal and communal self-examination and transformation.

According to Baldwin, Rev. King's words and actions were endowed with great authority because they reflected and followed from the conversion he himself experienced. Speaking and acting from a deeper understanding of and call to embody genuine humanity, Rev. King did not profess different gospels to different audiences, he summoned everyone to meet the unique challenge of personal growth into full-fledged humanity. By doing so, he led and empowered African American churches to become a true leaven of social transformation. The healing sanctuary was now turned into a school for transformative discipleship.⁷⁴ True love for all human beings and African Americans in particular enabled him to be free to speak authoritatively and challengingly to white Americans. Baldwin argues:

King impressed me then and he impresses me now as a man solidly anchored in those spiritual realities concerning which he can be so eloquent What he says to Negroes he will say to whites; and what he says to whites he will say to Negroes. He is the first Negro leader in my experience, or the first in many generations, of whom this can be said.... The fact that King really loves the people he represents and has—therefore—no hidden, interior need to hate the white people who oppose him has had and will, I think, continue to have the most far-reaching and unpredictable repercussions on our racial situation.⁷⁵

⁷² Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 294.

⁷³ Baldwin, “The Dangerous Road before Martin Luther King,” in *Collected Essays*, 657.

⁷⁴ Baldwin, “The Dangerous Road,” 643.

⁷⁵ Baldwin, “The Dangerous Road,” 639.

Baldwin is particularly struck by the fact that Rev. King exuded peace, emotional stability, and firmness of resolution, and this, from early on in his life. He perceives Rev. King standing at the center of a network of healthy relationships with himself, his family (close and extended), other persons, and God, which defined and eventually summoned him to follow a unique prophetic vocation and ministry. Grounded in and empowered by love, Rev. King could speak the truth powerfully and summon others to withhold and be lastingly changed by it.

Baldwin was given to see in Rev. King's exceptional leadership and accomplishments in the civil rights movement the social-political analogue of what he himself felt called to be and realize: to trigger and accompany, through his artistic vocation and work, his fellow Americans (white Christians especially) to and as they experience liberating self-revelation. In Baldwin's creative vocation, the artist and lover identify to enable transformative self-revelation and growth. "An artist does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation, make freedom real."⁷⁶ The artist and the Christian minister responding to their divine calling measure the distance separating their current plight and the fulfilled human condition love enables them to foresee. The duty and responsibility of the artist and Christian minister are therefore to build bridges enabling the crossing of the distance separating reality from ideal, what is from what should be. "The truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be. The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation."⁷⁷ Creative art and vocation essentially correspond to Christian discipleship and ministry, for authentic human experience is generated by and identifies with the "effort to create oneself."⁷⁸ When authentic, this free self-creation results and finds embodiment in faithful witness to the truth. Rev. King led the American people in coming to grips with their own past, the necessary preliminary step to and for the creation and advent of a free world.

The exacting crossing of the night of the past will lead to the dawn of a promising future. As a gifted writer, Baldwin ministered to help his fellow Americans (white Christians first and foremost) add a new chapter to their history, one where they could together acquire a common humanity by constructively acknowledging and responding to their involvement in the systemic oppression of African Americans.

Whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. This is also true of nations.... We have an opportunity ... of moving beyond the concepts

⁷⁶ Baldwin, "The Creative Process," 672.

⁷⁷ Baldwin, "The Creative Process," 671.

⁷⁸ James Baldwin, "The Nettle, Danger..." in *Collected Essays*, 688.

of race and class and caste.... The price for this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record. The record of that journey is most clearly revealed in the personalities of the people the journey produced.⁷⁹

Following in Martin Luther King Jr.'s footsteps, Baldwin thus summons all people of good will (black and white) to devote themselves to the sacred task of educating themselves and white Americans and Christians into a more humane state of consciousness and way of living. The adoption of a prophetic mode of existence and witnessing grounded in the recognition of every person's absolute dignity is the only sound principle for the construction of a meaningful history. Belief in God does not take away, but rather defines and empowers human transformative agency:

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. 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 our country, and change the history of the world.⁸⁰

In Baldwin's view, Rev. King's assassination revealed the profound duality existing within the American psyche (personal identity). While each individual is by nature a gift of infinite value to the world, the quality of the acquired moral character of most persons is unworthy or vile. In practice, this means that each and every person ought never to assume she is more mature than anyone else and should therefore demand, in terms of moral growth, infinitely more from herself than from others.⁸¹

CONCLUSION: TOWARD LIBERATING CONFESSION AND COMMUNION

For white Christians, confronting and overcoming our racism thus demands authentic lifelong conversion. Extensive inner reform is rendered all the more necessary by the fact that Christianity and Christians (may) have succumbed to the temptation of concealing our racism under the cover of the struggle against racism outside the confines of the Christian community. Being opposed to racism outside the church does not necessarily mean and entail that white Christians have overcome the racism permeating the church itself and the racism living in our own hearts. Social justice work and political activism can easily be transmuted into efficient means to avoid having to confront

⁷⁹ Baldwin, "The Creative Process," 672.

⁸⁰ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 346–47.

⁸¹ See Young III, *James Baldwin's Understanding of God*, 157.

one's own racist ideas, intentions, actions and habits. This is not to say that white churches and individuals have not worked at combatting racism (which would be blatantly false), but rather to defend that the overcoming of racism demands more on the part of white Christians than fighting against it from without.

The root of evil and sin lies in the human heart, the principle and source of intentional behavior. Racism as intention, act, habit, and culture is undergirded by the sin of denial—that is, the denial of someone else's humanity (deemed different from oneself) and the denial of one's own humanity (by exclusion from the human community). The overcoming of racism requires the spiritual transformation of each and every human person who was born, raised, and lives in racist society and environment. Nothing short of a new heart is necessary to vanquish racism and its deleterious effects. The transformative power of the African American experience and witness is attested in the life and work of Jim Wallis, an influential activist. Wallis' journey of faith and discipleship, as a white Evangelical growing up in Detroit, demonstrates that under the guidance of their African American neighbors white Christians can shoulder the cross that is confronting our racism. Wallis thus relates:

Five decades ago, revelations about race in my hometown turned my life upside down—and turned me in a different direction. Encounters with black Detroit set me on a new path, on which I am still walking. My own white church ignored and denied the problem of race.... I had to leave my white home church to finally discover Christ himself and come back to my faith.⁸²

To be authentic, Christian faith and witness demand transformative compassion. To break through and away from the prison that is the ideology of whiteness, white Christians must suffer, die, and be reborn in and to the Christ who fully assumed the suffering and oppressed humanity of African Americans. Whiteness must die for genuine humanity to rise. Baldwin astutely foresaw and underscored that white Christians must acknowledge their fear and hatred of African Americans. The painful duty of confession, the duty of mature responsibility, comes first. The Church must find the courage to assume its humanity in full and ask for forgiveness. Christianity has everything to learn from listening to what African Americans have to say about what being human in the United States means and entails today. White Christians living in this nation must listen to and learn from our African American neighbors who they really are and what the true tenor of their past and present is, so as to be able, with them and under their

⁸² Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 2–4.

guidance, to lay the foundations of a truly and effectively “United States.” 

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