

## James Baldwin's Dialectical Approach to Christianity

RASHED AHMAD A. ALLAH DAGHAMIN

English Department  
University of Allahabad  
Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh  
India

### **Abstract:**

*In a series of writings, both fictional and non-fictional, James Baldwin spoke of Christianity in non-traditional ways; questioning God's working and existence 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. 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. It is merit mentioning that although Baldwin rejected Christian faith, and criticized and admonished Christian hypocrisy and double standards, he continued to value many teachings of Christianity. Baldwin substitutes Religion with Love and Blues Music as they have a formidable and transformative power in eliminating the problem of racism in the American society. However, the dialectic which I am going to examine in the paper is evident in James Baldwin's bitter criticism of the Christian church and his revolt against the white God, along with his devotion to some essential Christian teachings, his faith in a "vague and undefined God", and his evolving theology of self-examination and love.*

**Key words:** James Baldwin, Christianity, dialectical approach, teachings, hypocrisy, racism, American society.

James Baldwin grew up in the black fundamentalist church in Harlem, where his tyrannical father served as an assistant minister and James gained a profound sense of his own power and potential in serving as a successful preacher from the ages of fourteen to seventeen. In a tightly-argued article "Just Above My Head: James Baldwin's Quest For Belief" Michael Lynch argues that Baldwin's collection of essays *The Fire Next Time* (*FNT* hereafter) contains an account of the issues which drew the teen Baldwin into the church and the pulpit, including his fear of not surviving, his Harlem environment, his sense of personal depravity, and his dispirit need for a 'gimmick' and a source of leverage against his stern father (38).

Baldwin explains that "...all the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into the church" (*FNT* 41). Next to the predominantly secular motives and the cynical behavior he observes especially among the clergy men Baldwin places the major source of his frustration in the church's failure to apply the Christian principle of universal love:

There was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair ...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. (*FNT* 53-54)

Baldwin tells how his father hit him when he once brought to home a Jewish friend who was not saved and who therefore would burn for eternity. Baldwin's response to his father, "He is a better Christian than you are" (*FNT* 51) depicts his renunciation of the church on Christian grounds and foreshadows his lifelong search for an ideal of love outside the church (Lynch 1997, 287). In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (*GTIM* hereafter) Baldwin accuses the black fundamentalist church for its image of, to use Lynch's words, "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” (287).

Baldwin's objection is primarily against the awful sense of destiny and the inevitability of punishment and perdition infused into the minds of the faithful. *The Amen Corner*, which was written shortly after *GTIM*, intensifies the attacks on the church, following John Grimes's ambiguous conversion with David Alexander's explicit loss of faith that constitutes his coming of age. In works such as, *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Baldwin considers the black church socially superfluous and irresponsible, essentially a pawn of racist white Christendom. However, Baldwin's anger with the black church in these later works reflects his far more omnipresent criticism of the white church.

According to Lynch, Baldwin's conflict with white Christianity is reflected in almost all his work, with generally increasing criticism, anger and harshness and with occasional lack of self-restraint (288). Although Baldwin sometimes bases his objections primarily on external realities of political power, he in fact argues from the same spiritual foundation as in his commentary on the black church, citing white Christians' betrayal of the commandment to universal love. In *A Rap on Race*, Baldwin alludes to the failure of love as the main cause of racism and injustice inflicted on black Americans:

To put it in rather exaggerated primitive terms, I don't understand at all what the white man's religion means to him. I know what the white man's religion has done to me. And so, I could –can- accuse the white Christian world of being nothing but a tissue of lies, nothing but an excuse for power, as being as removed as anything can possibly be from any sense of worship and, still more, from any sense of love. I cannot understand that religion. (83)

In many cases Baldwin equates Christianity with the sanctification of racism; for example, when speaking as the collective black voice drawing the contradiction between

Christian belief and practice he says "I was on those cattle boats which brought me here ...in the name of Jesus Christ" (*Rap* 222). As far as Baldwin is concerned, it is crucial that "whoever wishes to become a truly moral being... must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church" (*FNT* 61). Reflecting on the relative moralities and methods of the black and white churches, Baldwin decides that:

The principles governing the rites and customs of the churches in which I grew up did not differ from the principles governing the rites and customs of other churches, white. The principles were Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others. (*FNT* 45)

Baldwin finds white Christian theology severely limited by racist implications and a dwarfed, self-serving image of God. He cites as racist the "familiar brand" of theology which asserts that biblical curse on the sons of Ham condemns black and justifies their enslavement and abuse (*FNT* 64). Baldwin observes that the white idea of God seems founded on cynical self-interest and protection of material goods; he claims that whites "don't even deal with God. God for them seems to be a metaphor for purity and for safety. The whole heart of the Christian legend has always been in some sense...really obscene" (*Dialogue* 37). Baldwin views that the dominant image of God must be transformed or eliminated completely because "if the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him... it is time to replace Him – replace Him with what?" (*FNT* 61-71). The challenge and the mystery of that question, according to Lynch, occupy Baldwin for his entire career (289). Baldwin's personal task to discover God corresponds with the profound need of American and Western culture to discover a new theology.

On the other hand, the most notable and recurrent

protest in Baldwin's works against the "oppressive God" finds expression in the act of cursing Him. Many of the characters in his fiction and drama experience neither a friendly God nor the comfort of purity or safety, but only terrors of violation and danger, both physical and psychic. In rage and despair, many characters curse God at great risk to their survival. First of all, in (*GTIM*) John Grimes, standing before the altar, is about to curse the God of his father when he falls to the floor and begins his night –long journey through hell. Giovanni, in *Giovanni's Room*, after spitting on a cross has spent years in open rebellion against the God. Rufus Scott of *Another Country* curses God as a final nihilistic spasm and a desperate plea for understanding as he jumps from a bridge to his death. In *Blues for Mister Charlie* Juanita, Parnell, and Meridian express either disdain or hatred for God who seems blind at best, and Lorenzo condemns "this damn almighty God who don't care what happens to nobody, unless, of course, they're white...If I could get my hands on Him, I'd pull Him out of the heaven and drag Him through this town at the end of a rope" (15). In *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Leo Proudhammer swears never to forgive God for the destruction of his brother's spirit, and Leo's repeated curse of God contributes to the decay of his identity. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Tish also envisions violence against the God whose "days have got to be numbered. That God these people say they serve...has got a very nasty sense of humor. Like you'd beat the shit out of Him, if he was a man" (30). As confirmed by several of these characters, evidently the familiar Baldwin's theme of the self-destructiveness of hatred extends also to those individuals who reasonably but tragically utter their hatred of the white God.

Baldwin argues that whites maintain the monolithic, forbidding image of God so that they could support their superior power and cling to the notion of blacks as inferior:

They conclude...that if these people...washed themselves and straightened up they could all be Harry Belafonte. There is nothing wrong with the system, so the American thinks; there

is something wrong with the people. (*Rap* 138)

The white God, Lynch states, approves of social Darwinism and the election of saved or superior individuals, and his believers understand that those who do not prosper or who fail to survive do so ultimately because of either their own fault or their own choice (1997, 290).

Baldwin, according to Lynch, notes that many Christians are offended by Christ's being "a very disreputable person" (*Rap* 85), he also adds: "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..." (86). When Margaret Mead points out that she is not trying to call Baldwin a Christian; he in fact allows the identification, saying "I'll accept the term" (86). In the last decade of his life, Baldwin joined one of the largest Baptist churches in Washington, DC. (O'Neale 1988, 131).

Despite the obvious frequency of Baldwin's criticism of white and black Christian theology, in a few situations he confesses that the problem with Christianity may be the way Christians themselves practice their ideals i.e. the problem has not to do with the Christian faith as such but rather with the professed Christians who preach Christianity. In discussing the church with Mead, he points out that any religious discipline which is "not interiorized... really is meaningless" (*Rap* 87). Baldwin admits that he has known some authentic Christians, people for whom risk and sacrifice are at the heart of their faith:

I've known some white Christians –I mean real ones. I don't mean this quite the way it sounds; I don't mean that they are as rare as that. But the ones I've known were always in trouble. The last one I knew well had to leave the church in order to do what he felt he had to do. (*Rap*87)

In the introduction to *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin connects racism not to the religion of Christianity itself but to the 'plague' of "our concept of Christianity", adding that "this

raging plague has the power to destroy every human relationship” (7). While several of his later works, including *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *Just Above My Head*, and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* continue the commentary on the black and white churches, they exhibit a greater tone of moderation, with emphasis not so much on denying Christianity as on adapting or transforming it in order to serve the American community in a better way.

Baldwin obviously must be regarded as a religious writer regardless of his feelings and views about the Christian church and religion. He continually wrestles with God's meaning and identity and his debt to Christian ideals informs his own evolving vision. Lynch in his “James Baldwin's Quest for Belief” argues that,

Baldwin's early rescue from the streets by the church, along with his youthful immersion in biblical wisdom and symbology, seems to have instilled in him an unalterable sense of the power of spiritual realities and a preoccupying concern with the religious, moral, and psychological aspects of salvation. (1997, 290)

Baldwin uses in his essays and interviews the word theology frequently, in different contexts and in meanings ranging from cosmology to political ideology to the more traditional meaning of man's relation to God.

When Baldwin is asked about his religious beliefs in an interview, he ducks the issue and focuses on how his belief would be perceived or misperceived by the church:

MacInnes: I never have been able to make out, Jimmy, whether, you are or not a religious writer. Are you? Does the concept of God mean something to you? Are you a believer in any sense, or not?

Baldwin: I'm not a believer in any sense which would make sense to any church, and any church would obviously throw me out. I believe –what do I believe? I believe in ...I believe in love-that sounds very corny ... (Mossman 1965, 48)

One can say that Baldwin's work shows clearly a writer troubled with belief in God as an unshakable burden, an impression suggested by his many characters driven by questions on God's identity as much as on their own and haunted by the conflict between their rebellion against and their great need of Him. Baldwin's essays also ponder on this central issue. Linking racist attitudes towards blacks with an impoverished notion of God, Baldwin argues for a revised image of God which he sees as positive if highly mysterious:

I suggest that the role of the Negro in American life has something to do with what our concept of God is, and from my point of view, this concept is not big enough. It has got to be made much bigger than it is because God is, after all, not anybody's toy. To be with God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you. I conceive of my own life as a journey toward something I do not understand, which in the going toward, makes me better. I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not a means to control others. (*Nobody Knows My Name* 113)

Also, in another clear and rare statement of belief, Baldwin claims God and reverses the roles of traditional religion and highlights our responsibility for God: "I've claimed him as my father and I'll give him a great time until it's over, because God is our responsibility" (*Dialogue* 38). In addition to these few cases where we can see Baldwin's unusual openness regarding his image of God, Baldwin in some places admits his assimilation of Christian ideals and even accepts the designation of Christian. Although he hints that his morality may have limits when confronted with white violence, Baldwin tells Nikki Giovanni "I wonder if I'm moral at all" (*Dialogue* 33). The most part Baldwin's mission as a prophet and artist is founded on a profound sense of morality.

In *A Rap on Race*, Mead corners a shifty Baldwin, who reluctantly acknowledges that he derives his concept of

morality from Christian teachings. Referring to his mother as “the first Christian I knew”, adding, “Somehow she really made us believe it was more important for us to love each other and love other people than anything else” (85).

Baldwin’s identity as a moralist owes much to his training in Christianity, and his moralism for the most part “avoids didacticism, self-righteousness, and judging others because it is rooted in humility and the refusal to proclaim his own virtue” (*Dialogue* 33). Although often attacked as preaching sexual immorality and libertinism in his writing, Baldwin celebrates sexuality of whatever orientation but always subjects its expression to the ethic of respecting and loving the others 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. Another aspect of the Christian roots of Baldwin’s vision is the ideal of the community. Discussing his talent as a writer, Baldwin credits the church for his understanding that the individual’s gift is meant for, and belongs to 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. (Hall, *Conversations* 106)

While Baldwin’s theology exhibits a high degree of constancy, it evolves, as Lynch mentions, “from fear to self-affirmation and from emphasis on the individual to the community” (“Quest” 292). Baldwin’s faith develops more as a corrective to than repudiation of Christian theology as understood and practiced, and might be called “radical” in the sense of being faithful to the spirit of the early church. Baldwin’s whole career is a meditation on the meaning of conversion, as he frequently

features the irony of the religious person's being converted away from religion. In Baldwin's essays, drama, and fiction he examines his own and his protagonists' crises of faith, their struggles which lead them away from the relatively shallow externality of dogma and certainty and toward the greater interiority of uncertainty, subjectivity, risk and love.

From *GTIM* through *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Baldwin seeks but never seems to find the loving God, but he constantly makes an act of faith in this unknown force. The title of his final novel, *Just Above My Head*, comes from a gospel song Ida Scott sings in *Another Country* and refers to this leap of faith in a God who is intuited but who seems always absent: "Just above my head/ I hear a music in the air,/ And I really do believe/ There's a God somewhere" (63).

In the introduction to *The Price of the Ticket* which was written two years before Baldwin's demise, he admits he may have never forsaken his obsession with religion:

If I were still in the pulpit 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. (XVIII)

Although Baldwin says that "in order to become a moral human being" he may have to "stay out of the temple" (*Rap* 86). Baldwin's investment in Christian spirituality remains extensive though subtle as he openly "questions divine existence while still courting its allegiance" (O'Neale 1988, 140). Although Baldwin's works of the spiritual dialectic of revolt and faith are very significant, this dialectic has received little critical reception. Critics found in Baldwin predominant and continuous negativity and artistic decline as well as disinterest in Christian mythology; nevertheless, O'Neale argues that "the unflinching optimism seen in the entirety of his work, that only love within and between the races will ultimately save America...is rooted in the philosophy of Christian faith" (1988, 131). Although O'Neale recognizes the ambiguity and

hiddenness of Baldwin's faith, she suggests his motivation in preservation an obvious declaration:

Baldwin still attempts to separate the visible history of black America's experience with Christianity from the spiritual, visionary experience that both he and the race may have internalized. The reality of that unseen truth ...enables him to keep advocating that the demonstrable love of Christ will bring to earth that paradise revealed on the threshing floor ...Then and only then will his quest end and he can unhesitatingly acknowledge oneness with the Christian God, his father. Until that essence of true Christianity is revealed, Baldwin's dissociation from variant fathers tempts him to withhold absolute commitment. (1988, 141)

Although Baldwin's commitment to Christianity might be inevitably incomplete, Baldwin's dedication to the personal quest for the hidden God stretches throughout his work, from *GTIM* through *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*.

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