

***“Trapped in a History Which They Do Not Understand:” Reading
James Baldwin with Thomas Merton, Toward a Spiritual
Theological Interpretation of Mass Incarceration***

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Thomas Merton’s under-appreciated engagement with James Baldwin reveals Baldwin to be an essential resource for a theological account of mass incarceration and the spiritual sustenance of atonement to dismantle the “New Jim Crow.” Merton highlights the religious insight of Baldwin’s conviction that white Americans are ravaged by a spiritual imprisonment that is concretized in distinct historical dynamics and which spell an apocalyptic foreboding. White Americans are, in Baldwin’s words, “trapped in a history which they do not understand.” With attention to the methodological and ethical pitfalls of reading Baldwin theologically, and situating this exchange in the broader context of black theology and theological/spiritual responses to mass incarceration, it is argued that Baldwin produces essential and unique religious insights for interrupting the contemporary criminalization of black bodies. Merton’s additions to Baldwin’s thought is generative for future possibilities, particularly with Merton’s development of a more robust mysticism.

INTRODUCTION

As I consider Michelle Alexander’s landmark exploration of racialized mass incarceration in *The New Jim Crow* I am haunted by this one unanswered question: *Why?* If the patterns of racial subjugation in the United States are as cyclical and intractable as her analysis would suggest, why exactly is this the case? Alexander explores several explanations for the phenomenon of mass incarceration: Politics, capitalism, the conscious and unconscious habits of white supremacy. These each deserve a crucial role in the narration. Today I want to consider what unique addition religion, spirituality, and mysticism provides to answering this question—does an exploration of the human soul make any sense of this history, or inform us of what we are to do about it? I draw our attention to two, perhaps unlikely, mid-century writers who take up this very question in the midst of the previous Jim Crow. Two men who are not, formally speaking, theologians and are rarely, if ever, put into conversation: James Baldwin and Thomas Merton.

Despite possessing radically different social contexts and biographies, Baldwin and Merton held several important concerns and experiences in common: Namely, a shared commitment to the vocation of being an honest writer, and a rare ability to elucidate the pitfalls and possibilities of the human soul in history. While it seems unlikely that Baldwin was aware of Merton, Merton explicitly took significant inspiration from Baldwin’s writings. This is particularly the case in Merton’s work *The Seeds of Destruction*, creatively interpreting Baldwin in light of Merton’s own Catholic and monastic spirituality. This paper considers the spiritual diagnoses James Baldwin and Thomas Merton propose of white America in the wake of the previous Jim Crow, and how this might shed light on the ‘New Jim Crow.’ The religious traditions that influence them, black Pentecostalism and Western Catholicism respectively, here come into a mutual conversation, one that suggests the ways that religious and spiritual traditions can inform challenges of the cycles of systemic racism in the U.S.

White Americans are *trapped*—trapped by an internal spiritual condition marked self-loathing and pathological self-deception, haunted by an image of the Divine as a terrorizing and life-destroying force. This intense terror results in a cyclical and entrenched penchant for terrorizing and trapping the bodies of people of color. This is the prophetic message that James Baldwin elucidated throughout his career as a writer and intellectual. This prophetic message helped to ‘wake up’ Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk, who attempted to come to terms with this message within the resources of his Catholic, monastic, spirituality and his complicity as a white man in America. And it is a message that speaks powerfully, even presciently, to the new manifestations of Jim Crow; a system marked by terror, enclosure, and erasure.

James Baldwin saw in the United States a society ravaged by “spiritual discontent.”¹ Throughout his writing he explicated the nature of this impoverishment as a root cause of America’s racial nightmare. Taking Baldwin’s diagnoses seriously, Thomas Merton hones in on the unique spiritual poverty of his own people, white Americans. At times, Merton tellingly fails to include himself in the white ‘they,’ but does so in his more honest moments. He asks: “Have we forgotten that the Negro is there *because of us*? His crisis is. . . in fact *our crisis*.”² It is a crisis which emerges solely from, he says, “the purblind, guilt ridden, self-deceiving, self-tormenting and self-destructive psyche of the white man.”³ This means that the quandary of racism in the United States is fundamentally “a spiritual and religious” issue.⁴

Baldwin employs a very particular set of words and images to explicate the condition of the soul of white Americans. The language that is most pervasive is one of *entrapment*—a network of language that articulate notions of bondage, incarceration, and claustrophobic terror. This imagery is employed to express the existence of a twofold spiritual reality: White Americans are, firstly, trapped and haunted by an internal condition of existential terror and bondage, a pervasive self-loathing. And they are also trapped by their inability to confront this fact about the condition of their soul and what it has wrought in history: “They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand, and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.”⁵ This *incarceration within the walls of history* speaks to white America’s inability to reconcile itself with its sins, and its need to ignore, hide, and whitewash them, by any means necessary. Merton speaks of “white men together, in spite of their fantasies of innocence,” as “*prisoners*” of fantastical delusions.⁶

There is, for both men, a theological dimension to this condition; one which they describe differently out of their respective commitments and religious influences. Although Baldwin abandoned institutional Christianity, he maintained some belief in a cosmic force of love at work in time and space. A “mysterious, uncontrollable energy”⁷ which issues a call to human beings to love and be loved.⁸ Embracing this force of love, and thereby loving oneself and others, takes place in deeply embodied ways—through art, human desire, and political liberation.⁹ Merton highlights the need for silent contemplation and union with Christ in the Eucharist as the sites where love of God and others, the cure for pathological self-loathing, comes to fruition.¹⁰ White Americans are haunted, says Baldwin, by “a theological terror,” a “hot, self-righteous, fearful. . .

1 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993), 75.

2 Thomas Merton, *The Seeds of Destruction* (New York, NY: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1987), 38.

3 *Ibid.*, 46.

4 *Ibid.*, 86.

5 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 9.

6 Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, 87.

7 Josiah Ulysses Young, III, *James Baldwin's Understanding of God: Overwhelming Desire and Joy* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 101.

8 *Ibid.*, 73.

9 *Ibid.*, 73.

10 Thomas Merton, *The Living Bread* (London: Burns & Oates, 1976), xii.

spirit.”¹¹ This “theological” terror often shows up among African Americans as well, as an imposed false consciousness that traps and encloses the black subject.¹²

Spiritual entrapment has distinct political and embodied consequences for black bodies. For Baldwin, this entrapment generally relates to the realities of segregation and the relegation of black Americans into ghettos. It also speaks profoundly, however, to the conditions of racialized mass incarceration. Baldwin’s novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, especially allows us to make this connection—in its exploration of the existential realities of black characters as objects of a terrorizing criminal justice system. A rich set of imagery is employed to explore a haunting sense of entrapment and claustrophobia. Autonomy, both physical and psychological, is restricted and space is arranged by a sometimes hidden, subtle, demonic, force of terror and bondage. In one passage, a young black man named Daniel has recently been released after an unjust imprisonment. The main character, Tish, recalls: “Daniel stays with us till midnight. He’s a little afraid to leave, afraid, in fact, to hit those streets. . . . Daniel. . . is terrified at the same of what that life may bring, is terrified of freedom; and is struggling in a trap.”¹³

Mark Taylor, in his seminal study on theology and mass incarceration, persuasively describes America’s incarceration epidemic within a much broader account of an American system of *terror*. “Police violence, incarceration and the death penalty,” as well as foreign imperialistic mechanisms, all make up what Taylor calls “Lockdown America.”¹⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas’s reflects on the death of Trayvon Martin, describes what she calls a Stand Your Ground culture, which marks black bodies as criminal invaders to “innocent” white space, and employs violence and incarceration to maintain this arrangement of space.¹⁵ The language that Merton and Baldwin employ to make a spiritual account of the old Jim Crow provide a compelling image for making sense of the *new* Jim Crow understood as a system of terror, spatial arrangement, restriction of movement. Unable to accept themselves, or their history, white America has opted for a system that even more literally (which is not to say it is more or less unjust or violent) represents the state of its collective soul: Trapping and terrorizing through police or vigilante-citizen violence, over-criminalization, and mass incarceration. The bodies that by their very presence threaten to reveal the violent discontent of the white soul, and a history that cannot be incorporated or reconciled with the identity of innocent whiteness, are hidden away and branded as criminal, in order to maintain stark self-*unawareness*.¹⁶ What can be done? Both Baldwin and Merton reflect on the resources of their religious backgrounds to answer this question for their own time, in ways that can speak powerfully to us.

Baldwin’s understanding of his vocation as a writer was driven by a sense of “quest for finding solutions of human predicament.”¹⁷ Baldwin maintained that a writer can and must engage and unveil the complexities of human existence in order to overcome the maladies that plague the human soul and human society: “It is [the] power of revelation which is the business of the novelist.”¹⁸ The fact that he relies on language of *revelation*, is no accident. His notion of the function of the writer and artist reflects the function of the preacher in his black Pentecostal upbringing, where preaching is a creative, rhythmic, performance that initiates connection to such

11 Ibid.

12 James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 22-23.

13 James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2006), 106.

14 Mark L. Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), xi.

15 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015), 201.

17 Bhumika Sharma, “Baldwin’s Quest for Panacea: A Case Study,” *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no. 4 (2012): 519.

18 Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 15-16.

spiritual realities, and ultimately to the Divine.¹⁹ Baldwin believed that he, as an artist, engaged in this same task.²⁰ The artist should, like the preacher, “make a confession,” identifying “the things people like to sweep under the rug.”²¹ Baldwin’s Pentecostal roots charge with spiritual significance the written and spoken word, and vocation of the artist, in unveiling what is hidden. Mass incarceration understood as a spiritual dilemma demands responses that embody this same sense of task.

The religious categories of drama, worship, and liturgy are also helpful. Baldwin retained an awe for the way that charismatic worship moved and drew people into a drama of good overcoming evil, love overcoming hate, sin giving way to holiness.²² Baldwin bemoaned, however, that this dramatic power almost never persisted outside the church walls. In many ways, Baldwin’s career and writing evinced a desire to find and produce what he thought was lost, but present in trace, in the black Church, especially in the Civil Rights movement—a liberating, embodied, participation with love *in* the world.²³

Merton riffs on this theme. For Merton, the category of liturgy and ritual help him articulate the corporate and political outworking of white American spiritual malaise. He is somewhat vague in specifying exactly what he means by this, but he writes of American public rituals, which operate to promote “an evasion” from reality, or “a daydream.”²⁴ White Americans arrange other bodies, and engage in a variety of performative measures, in order to dramatize the world they would like to believe they live in. They are trapped within the confines of an elaborate self-deception.²⁵ Merton believed that the Catholic liturgy should *ideally* operate as a *counter*-liturgy that unveils reality, unites people to the love of God, self, and others.²⁶ But Merton imitates Baldwin’s pessimism. Christianity fails miserably in this regard.²⁷

Instead, the power that should be present in Catholic worship is found outside of it. This spiritual vitality is especially present in the Civil Rights movement, which Merton describes as a “religious protest,” that seeks to shatter the idyllic fantasies of white America.²⁸ The movement possesses the very spiritual vitality that Merton finds lacking in the Catholic Mass. He describes the movement as a series of “processions,” during which “hymns” are sung. The tradition of slave spirituals are like the “*magnolia Dei* which are at the heart of the Christian liturgy,” he says. Indeed, he explains, “the Negro spirituals of the last century remain as classic examples of what a living liturgical hymnody ought to be.” It is in this context in which religion becomes “a prophetic fire of love and courage, fanned by the breathing of the Spirit of God.”²⁹

Public ritual and dramatization is just as, if not more, necessary for the new Jim Crow as the old one. Mark Taylor’s work, again, exposes the myriad ways in which Lockdown America relies upon drama, aesthetics, and performance to terrorize, legitimate itself, incarcerate, and murder. This includes the “dramatic spectacle” of mass arrests and raids, for example.³⁰ Michelle Alexander

19 Douglas Field, “Pentecostalism and All That Jazz: Tracing James Baldwin’s Religion,” *Literature and Theology* 22, no. 4 (2008): 442-443.

20 Josiah Ulysses Young, III, *James Baldwin’s Understanding of God: Overwhelming Desire and Joy* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 22-23.

21 *Ibid.*, 23.

22 Young, 20-21.

23 Cf. Young, 114.

24 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 2014), 34.

25 *Ibid.*

26 He writes, in what one may call a more naïve point in his career, about how the Eucharist removes guilt and self-loathing, reducing projections and scapegoating (*Living Bread*, 35).

27 Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, 27.

28 *Ibid.*, 51.

29 *Ibid.*, 73.

30 Taylor, 117.

also speaks to media and popular culture imaging of black criminality, which helps construct the myths upon which the new Jim Crow rests.³¹ Some of the most powerful, and disruptive, recent protests stand as example as counter-rituals and interruptions of public dramas. One thinks today of the interruptions of the illusions of commerce and segregation, which are embedded in the racist history of the US highway system, when Black Lives Matter activists have blocked traffic; interrupting a liturgical procession down the pavement aisle toward the altar of consumption. Or of NFL athletes interrupting the patriotic-entertainment spectacles of professional sports, challenging the rituals that serve to inculcate us against self-reflection or self-interrogation. Merton and Baldwin might suggest to us that it is in moments like these where the spiritual mechanisms of existential entrapment, and its destructive outworking, are unveiled and challenged. These are the places where a Divine power is at work.

I would like to conclude in a way that I hope is in keeping with the spirit of Baldwin and Merton: With a robust sense of foreboding. Both men kept a heavy sense of cosmic judgment alive in their work and both wrote under a sense of an impending day of reckoning for the United States if this spiritual knot was not untied. History would continue to haunt America unless exposed and reconciled, and eventually bring destruction upon itself. Neither Baldwin nor Merton were exactly clear in describing what judgment might look like. Merton specifically describes what he seems to think is the very real possibility of the United States being transformed into a fascistic state—a suggestion that seems quite a bit less hyperbolic in 2017 than it might have even just over a year ago. The reincarnation of Jim Crow, the renewed forces of white nationalism, a volatile populism sweeping itself into the White House, forces us to ask whether their warnings need to be reissued and even intensified. Under the veil of a color-blind myth, the trappings of so-called innocence are perhaps even more intractable, and the mechanism of trapping more hidden, but as deadly as ever. And warnings must be issued anew. For, as Baldwin put it: “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns [themselves] into a monster.”³²

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31 Cf., Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: New Press, 2012), 104-107.

32 Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 178.

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