

A Hermeneutics of the Cross: Religion and Racialized Discourse in the Thought of James Baldwin

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an exploration of selected portions of the essays and non-fiction of James Baldwin. In recent years the writings of Baldwin have enjoyed something of a renaissance. A new generation has been exposed to his work and the existence of video recordings of Baldwin have assisted in bringing his potent ideas to life. Baldwin's importance as a social critic and public intellectual has been confirmed by his nearly prescient engagement with issues and challenges that confront African American communities today. This paper examines the paradigm of the cross in Baldwin's analysis of racism, violence and suffering in the United States and beyond. A contextual assumption which frames this essay is that Western culture, and especially the culture of the United States have evidenced an aversion to what the Cross signifies. In light of this assumption one could conclude that the late Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, was correct when he observed that "North America needs a theology of the cross."

In his essay, "The Evidence of Things Not Seen", Baldwin observes that "the White man...discovered the Cross by way of the Bible, but the Black man discovered the Bible by way of the Cross." It is this insight that forms the foundation of the hermeneutical lens through which Baldwin interprets the experience of being black. It not only provides a distinctive way of seeing the world and deciphering the meaning of life, but it also provides a grammar that allows Baldwin to speak truth to power. Baldwin is not, in my view, interested in articulating a theology of the cross, but rather employs the cross as a cipher, of sorts. In this paper I want to briefly suggest how the idea of the hermeneutic of the cross impacts Baldwin's view of suffering, religion and beauty.

SUFFERING BEFORE THE PRIVILEGED TEXT

Baldwin notes that the White man discovered the Cross by way of the Bible, but the Black man discovered the Bible by way of the Cross. Here he is suggesting what has long been a reality in the lives of black folk; namely that the Biblical text is not the primary lens through which they have seen and appropriated the world. This is not to say that the Bible has been unimportant for Baldwin in his attempt to understand the world. The titles of his books attest to the fact that the Bible has, perhaps, yielded a lexicon for Baldwin, but the grammar of for the articulation of the realities of black life is cruciform. The text has been viewed, interpreted, amended, recast and even rejected in the face of that dimension of tragic suffering and loss signified by the Cross. The well known account of Howard Thurman's grandmother insisting that certain portions of the Bible were not authoritative for her is an example of viewing the Bible through the lens of struggle and suffering. In this sense, it is the cross that grants authority to the text. It is the cross that creates the canon.

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Baldwin's perspective suggests that the cross is not a passive pass through for the experience of struggle. The cross is not a means of translating the text into the vernacular of victory. It is at once that constellation of collective experiences, constructed meanings, inscrutable terror, and hidden hopes that make up black life. The cross unhinges, destabilizes, disorients and reorients the parameters of black life precisely because of its ambivalent connotations.

The suffering of black people before the privileged text has at least two meanings. First, that black suffering is prior to the text. This is why black people can only embrace the biblical literalism of modern fundamentalists but denying key aspects of their own history and experience. By putting the Cross before the Bible, Baldwin makes black experience, and especially the experience of suffering in a position of priority before the text.

Second, that it is in the confrontation with this privileged text that much black suffering is rooted. The Bible has been, and continues to be, used to justify black suffering. While I admit that this use is a distortion of the Bible from my theological perspective, the fact that it is a distortion can only be determined when it is viewed from another perspective. When standing before a text that in many instances only has a privileged status because of its utility in supporting the suffering and oppression of black people, the primary means of resisting its oppressive privilege is the cross.

I. AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION IN THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS

Baldwin's description of black religion and the black church is influenced by the primacy of the cross in his thinking. Again, Baldwin does not appear to be interested in constructing a theology of the cross in the traditional sense, but rather in providing an intuitive, thick description of black life under the shadow of the cross. His sensitivity to black life under these conditions is apparent in Baldwin's encounter with religion which occurs in the midst of crisis.

"I underwent, during the summer that I became fourteen, a prolonged religious crisis. I use the word 'religious' in the common, and arbitrary, sense, meaning that I then discovered God, His saints and angels, and His blazing Hell. And since I had been born in a Christian nation, I accepted this Deity as the only one. I supposed him to exist only within the walls of a church—in fact, of our church—and I also supposed that God and safety were synonymous. The word 'safety' brings us to the real meaning of the word 'religious' as we use it. Therefore, to state it in another, more accurate way, I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid—afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without."ⁱ

It was to this church that Baldwin fled after his encounter with two sadistic police officers. This church provided him with both opportunity and apparatus for resisting oppression. He noted that survival depended on having something called a *gimmick*. "It was my career in the church that turned out, precisely, to be my gimmick."ⁱⁱ This gimmick carried with it a grave cost. It depended on and was funded by a denial of the very bodies it purported to save. Its theology required "a literal attempt to mortify the flesh should be made among black people...[who are] taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on world."ⁱⁱⁱ

Baldwin recounts his conversion experience which occurs when his friend invites him to a worship service led by a dynamic woman preacher.

"...one night, when this woman 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 that 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."^{iv}

Baldwin's account reflects the conversion patterns of slave narrative in that he was "slain in the Spirit" or struck dead by God. Baldwin was not only converted, he quickly became a sought after preacher. It was as a minister in church that Baldwin discovers that the relation between the cross and the veil. Whatever the cross was supposed to do for black people, was obscured the corrupted temple rituals of the church. In a particularly revealing passage, Baldwin describes the church as theater carried on behind a curtain.

"Being in the pulpit was like being in the theatre; I was behind the scenes and knew how the illusion was worked. I knew the other ministers and knew the quality of their lives. And I don't mean to suggest by this the 'Elmer Gantry' sort of hypocrisy concerning sensuality; it was a deeper, deadlier, and more subtle hypocrisy than that, and a little honest sensuality, or a lot, would have been like water in an extremely bitter desert. I knew how to work on a congregation until the last dime was surrendered...And the blood of the Lamb had not cleansed my in any way whatever. I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born. Therefore, when I faced a congregation, it began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike."^v

The traditional theological claim that is that on the cross the veil of the temple was torn, and what was hidden since the beginning of time is now brought out into the open. At this point, Baldwin's vocation as a writer comes to the forefront. His calling is to bring to light that which has been obscured. He settles his internal vocation conflict in his conversation with the Honorable Elijah Muhammed, who asks Baldwin if he is a Christian. Baldwin replies, "I am a writer."

II. BLACKNESS, BEAUTY AND THE CROSS

The Cross in theological thought has often been connected with the grotesque and paradoxically with notions of beauty. That is, it is simultaneously, an object of fear and revulsion and the object of adoration and devotion, even beauty. Baldwin, in his own being and body, describes this conflict between the grotesque and the beautiful. He was physically slight and, for most of his life, thought of himself as ugly. He wrote poignantly of his struggle to accept the way he looked.

"My father said, during all the years I lived with him, that I was the ugliest boy he had ever seen, and I had absolutely no reason to doubt him. But it was not my father's hatred of my frog eyes which hurt me, this hatred proving, in time, to be rather more resounding than real: I have my mother's eyes. When my father called me ugly, he was not attacking me so much as he was attacking my mother...But I thought that he must have been stricken blind (or was as mysteriously wicked as white people, a paralyzing thought) if he was unable to see that my mother was absolutely beyond any question the most beautiful woman in the world."^{vi}

Baldwin's reflection on beauty reveals a conflict between body and spirit that is yet unresolved in Christian thought. The root of this conflict is the inability to see the linkage between traditional Christian understanding of the incarnation and the cross. Traditional theological claims contrast the cross with the incarnation and most often misses the complexity of each. The cross is seen as a symbol of brutalized assault on the flesh, and the site of a battle between the oppressive and liberating forces in the world. The incarnation is seen as a symbol of the natural and irenic inhabitation of the human by the divine. The incarnation is a struggle and not a benign occupation of the flesh. The incarnation especially as told in the gospel of John is a statement about holding together body and spirit under the conditions of empire and oppression. To proclaim that the word became flesh, or as Brian Blount so aptly puts it, that the whisper became flesh, highlights the difficulty of the cohabitation of the word and the flesh under the conditions of empire. John's prologue does not lend itself to the cute manger scenes of contemporary Christmas celebrations, but foreshadows the cross as a site of struggle and conflict.

The incarnation affirms that the word has inhabited the flesh, with all that this entails under oppressive conditions. The cross affirms that the flesh has become the word, with all that this entails under oppressive conditions. This happens as the body of Christ is reflected in black bodies, twisted and grotesque, beautiful and graceful. Our flesh becomes the word that is read and believed as it reflects the body of the crucified one.

For Baldwin, it is the lens of the cross that allows him to find and recognize beauty within the grotesque. He connects his own appraisal of his appearance as ugly with the unyielding conviction that his mother is beautiful. The refusal to face the paradox of the cross, for Baldwin, is evident in the aversion toward death in white experience. "But white people do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them."^{vii} Reflecting on a conversation with the Honorable Elijah Muhammed Baldwin wonders about the connection between struggle and suffering in black life and beauty.

"*What will happen to all that beauty?* For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah's table and...we talked about God's or Allah's—vengeance, I wondered, when vengeance was achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then?*"^{viii} Baldwin's reflection on the idea of beauty is part of a larger stream of intellectual inquiry on the relationship between blackness and the sublime, or beautiful. Franz Fanon, in a particularly poignant passage engages in a reflection on black bodies in which the contemplation of their supposed grotesqueness leads to the question of beauty.

"My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly...I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?"^{ix}

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that Baldwin's perspective on life, blackness, suffering and religion, among other themes, is shaped by a hermeneutic of the cross. The cross in this sense is a deep and ambivalent symbol which obscures and reveals, which comforts and terrifies. It is basis on which one becomes, as a Christian, devoutly religious or defiantly agnostic. It is in Baldwin's reflection on the nature of beauty that the cross to the forefront as an interpretive lens through which black life might be more deeply understood. It is in the cross as grotesque that it is possible to find true beauty. Baldwin's insights can function as a basis upon which the United States faces the ugliness of its own past, and present for that matter. Whether we will or not is not a question of the cross, but of the resurrection.

REFERENCES

ⁱ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* The Dial Press, New York, 1963. P.29-30

ⁱⁱ *Fire Next Time*, p.38

ⁱⁱⁱ *Fire Next Time*, p.39

^{iv} *Fire Next Time*, p.43

^v *Fire Next Time*, p.51-3

^{vi} James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay* The Dial Press, New York, 1976. P.6.

^{vii} *Fire Next Time*, p.106

^{viii} *Fire Next Time*, p.118

^{ix} Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.113-4