"Lord, I Know I Been Saved"
Religious Experience in James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain

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Abstract

The world of Go Tell It on the Mountain is a theological world. Not only do the characters themselves follow a theology, but a version of the Christian God arguably appears as a character in the novel. Rather than promote or celebrate this Christian understanding of God, the novel critiques it, especially as it appears in the Black Holiness context of the novel. Theories on religious experience provide a way of understanding the focus and scope of this critique: Louis Dupré's theories provide a way of breaking down religious experience into parts and finding what significance the novel gives each of each of those parts; Ron Grimes' theories provide a way of uncovering the underlying theological assumptions inherent in the practices of the characters, and ways of linking those assumptions to race relations; William James' theories provide a contrast through which it is easier to see where and how Baldwin breaks away from the idealized, Protestant expectations of conversion experiences. These theories become tools for understanding the ways that Baldwin uses religious experiences to explore the intersection between religious practices, sexuality, and racial tension in the Black Holiness tradition in the novel.

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"And My Soul Looked Back and Wondered..."

The religious experiences James Baldwin describes in his novel Go Tell It on the Mountain are strangely familiar to me. The central experience in the novel occurs in the final chapter, when John, a young gay African-American, goes to the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized and is "slain in the Spirit." While lying on the dusty floor of the Black Holiness church in 1930s Harlem, John has a disturbing and revelatory vision that leads to his conversion. Although I grew up in the dramatically different environment of Halifax during the 80s and 90s as a heterosexual Caucasian Canadian, I felt as if I had experienced something similar. The predominantly white Pentecostal church I grew up in strongly encouraged and facilitated charismatic experiences akin to the one John has in the novel, and those experiences haunt me now that I have left the church. I poured out my feelings of angst and guilt to God in the midst of those experiences, and I believed God responded.

God's responses, however, were never quite clear. Like John in the novel, I frequently fell down "slain in the Spirit," a trance-like state in which worshippers who are filled with the Holy Spirit fall backwards, most often into the arms of people waiting to catch them and lower them to the floor. Once, when there was no one to catch me, I fell back onto a concrete floor with little carpet. I was not hurt, but I stayed there for hours. People gathered around me and prayed over me, just as they do with John, until eventually I got up and returned to my seat. Another time, I prayed at the altar, and experienced tremendous guilt for my lack of courage to "witness." I did not proselytize the way the church taught me I should. While I prayed about this, I had a vision of people I knew burning in Hell. It was vivid and disturbing, just as John's vision of his family and fellow church-goers performing rituals covered in "unholy blood" is disturbing (206).

During these experiences I felt a mix of ecstatic awe and terror. This is similar to the fear that characters in the Bible experience when God or an angel appears before them. It is also similar to what John feels when

> something moved in [his] body that was not John... filling him with anguish that he could never in his life have imagined, that he surely could not endure, that even now he could not believe, had opened him up; had cracked him open... ripped him and felled him in a moment, so that John had not felt the wound, but only the agony, had not felt the fall, but only the fear; and lay here, now helpless, screaming, at the very bottom of darkness. (195-6)

I compare this to the feeling I have on a roller coaster, or looking off a cliff, except with something extra. Combined with that sense of awe and danger was a sense that there was something else there, something bigger than me, something penetrating me, spreading through me. It is the most intense feeling I have ever had. In a way, it is addictive.

When my pastor made an altar call, I immediately felt a sense of urgency and guilt that motivated me to go up to the altar. It was not until I preached my own sermons to a youth group and made my own altar calls, that I understood the power that an altar call offers a preacher, the kind of power that Gabriel longs for in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Feeling the power in my words as I spoke, and then watching people respond by rising, walking down the aisle to the front and standing or even kneeling before me was proof that I "had run well... that God had used [me]" (102). With that power, however, came a feeling of terror, a feeling of unworthiness; a feeling of responsibility that seemed too big for me. Like Gabriel, "when souls came weeping to the altar [I] scarce dared to rejoice, remembering that soul who had not bowed, whose blood, it might be, would be required of [me] at judgment" (134). My response was not

to assert my power over those around me to lift myself up, as Gabriel does, but instead to examine myself closely.

This self-examination led me away from the church and the beliefs my parents had passed on to me. I not only looked at myself, and how I did not measure up to the expectations inherent within a Pentecostal church, but I also looked at how the expectations themselves may have been problematic. I began to question the more fundamentalist elements of Charismatic Christianity, and my faith gradually eroded until I could no longer identify myself as a Christian, let alone an evangelical charismatic one. Despite this, I could never shake the feeling that those charismatic experiences were somehow meaningful and important, even if I could not figure out what they meant. I missed those experiences. Nothing I have felt since has been as intense as those altar experiences. Nothing has offered the same kind of emotional release. Nothing has matched the kind of intimate connection I believed I had. When I read Go Tell It on the Mountain, I saw the potential to find meaning in a charismatic experience that did not diminish it, but also did not rely entirely on fundamentalist theology.

As I began to study the novel more closely, however, the differences between my experience and that of John became more evident. First, John's poverty is far greater than anything I knew in my lower middle class upbringing. While my father worked as a custodian for most of his life, he made enough money to provide my family with food, shelter, and the opportunity to pursue a university education. John, meanwhile, faces a future in which " he would grow old and black with hunger and toil" living a life that thus far "had given him a belly filled with wind and had bent his mother's back" (28). Second, John's experience of sexual repression in a charismatic church was far more pronounced than my own. While I struggled with the demands for purity and my own heterosexual desire, I could take comfort in the

church's teaching that my desire simply had to find the proper context. The church does not afford John, a young gay man, that same comfort. The result is that John is much more conflicted about his sexual feelings than I was. Third, and most importantly, John is an African American and I am a Caucasian-Canadian. Baldwin foregrounds race as a defining factor which has a profound impact on every other part of the characters' lives. As a result, my examination began to move away from a search for a broader understanding of evangelical charismatic experiences to a more specific study of how the experiences in the novel raise questions about the Black Holiness tradition and its interaction with issues of sexuality and race. This does not mean I have lost my personal connection to the experiences described in the novel. Instead, it forced me to look at my own experiences from a different perspective which emphasized the negative consequences of those experiences without negating the positive ones.

Introduction

In the introduction to The Amen Corner, James Baldwin writes about an editor of Go Tell It on the Mountain who asks him to remove "all that come-to-Jesus stuff" from the novel (xiv). Baldwin explains that the novel "is the study of a Negro evangelist and his family. They do, indeed, talk in a 'come-to-Jesus' idiom, but to 'take it out' could only mean that my editor was suggesting that I burn the book" (xiv). Religion, particularly the charismatic evangelical flavour of the Black Holiness tradition, is indeed central to the novel. This is not to say that Baldwin uses the novel as a tool to preach the "Gospel" and convert the "lost;" quite the contrary. In the novel, Baldwin examines how the theology and practices of the Black Holiness tradition interact with the racial inequality of the 1930s. The religious experiences in the novel become a focal point for this examination. Characters speak in tongues, fall to the floor in trances, have visions, and hear voices. While the characters themselves interpret the experiences in a way consistent with the Black Holiness tradition, the novel seems to point to different meanings, meanings which expose the potential harm the tradition poses to African-Americans.

Racial stereotypes, violence and other forms of injustice permeate every aspect of character's lives in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Racial injustice impacts the way characters view their own sexuality, the level of poverty they must endure, and their religious practices. The novel focuses on the latter, even though it overlaps with both poverty and sexuality. The Black Holiness tradition, as Baldwin represents it in the novel, is a religious tradition that is predominantly a reaction to racial injustice. Rather than encourage people to stand up and fight this injustice, it offers them a false sense of security and the promise of a better life after death; in many ways, it works to acclimate African-Americans to subjugation, and teaches them to endure and survive rather than thrive. Baldwin is careful in the novel not to dismiss the belief in

the Christian God, or the validity of the experiences characters have of God. Instead, he addresses the impact of the Black Holiness theodicy (theology which addresses God's relationship to suffering) on the lives of African-Americans. The religious experiences in the novel, John's conversion experience in particular, become the central events Baldwin uses to examine the intersection between issues of race, sexuality, and the Black Holiness tradition, and the impact of this intersection on the lives of the characters in the novel.

The Black Holiness Movement

The Black Holiness movement is not a unified denomination of churches that share a common theology and set religious practices. Instead, it is an umbrella term used for several different denominations and independent churches that have a similar focus in their theology and practices. The movement began in the late 19th century, primarily as a reaction against the African-American Baptist and Methodist churches. Clarence Taylor explains that there was "a growing dissatisfaction with the movement toward a refined way of worshiping in the established mainline churches, especially the Baptist and Methodist denominations" (38). In the Baptist church, this movement toward refinement was aggressively promoted by a group that called themselves "Progressives." John Giggie states the Progressives "took aim at lingering elements of 'slave religion', by which they meant practices of ecstatic worship and a popular faith in the supernatural" (179). This was done, essentially, "to refine black religion… and equip fellow Baptists with the values and skills that they believed promised the greatest chance of financial success, social respect, and influence in the post-Reconstruction South" (179). In other words, they saw their reforms as a way of making African-American religious practice more respectable and acceptable to the broader population.

Charles Price Jones, one of the early leaders of the Black Holiness movement, writes that this respectable African-American religion provided "doctrinal assurance" but not "spiritual assurance, heart peace, rest of soul, the joy of salvation in the understanding of a new heart, a new mind, a new spirit, constantly renewed and comforted by the Holy Ghost" (qtd. in Spencer 113). For Jones, as well as Charles Mason and William Christian, two other prominent leaders at the beginning of the Black Holiness Movement, this deeper feeling of the Holy Ghost manifested itself physically in the bodies of believers. Giggie notes that all three men "taught that the body was a medium through which faith might be celebrated in ways that ignored Baptist and Methodist injunctions against uninhibited praise" (187). Believers were permitted and encouraged to "leap, twirl, dance, sing lustily, and clutch at the heavens with outstretched arms in ecstatic displays of devotion and praise" (169). Believers were also "slain in the Spirit" and spoke in tongues, all while possessed by the Holy Spirit. The result was that, instead of a distant God who had no tangible contact with them, believers were provided with physical experiences which they identified as contact with God in the form of the Holy Spirit. As James Tinney suggests, "[o]ne does not wait to receive spirit energy in another world; it, too, is available in the Holy Ghost experience now" (qtd. in Sanders 7). Black Holiness participants were able to obtain immediate, tangible assurance in the form of physical manifestations of their interactions with the Holy Spirit, something that both the Baptist and Methodist churches not only discouraged but prohibited.

Not only do these experiences provide believers with an immediate sense of the divine, they also connect believers with a tradition that extends beyond "slave religion" to African religious practices. Cheryl Sanders surveys the works of Tinney, Molefi Kete Asante, John Phillips and David Daniels, all of whom suggest that the ecstatic practices of slave religion have

their origins in African religious practices. Based on this survey, Sanders argues "the charismatic features of Pentecostal churches that are demonstrably African in origin include possession trances, ritual dancing, drumming, and ecstatic speech (thought to be the language of angels or spirits)" (8). Asante goes so far as to suggest that white evangelicals "were actually replicating in America the same ecstatic religious behavior practiced in Africa" (Sanders 6). Sanders concludes that the worship of Black Holiness believers "shows that they believe God accepts the praise, performances, and aesthetic standards that are characteristic of Africans in diaspora" (64).

Ecstatic speech, also called speaking in tongues and glossolalia, began to gain momentum primarily through the Pentecostal revival meetings on Azusa Street in San Francisco, which began in 1906. There, William Seymour held inter-racial services that promoted the notion of the "baptism of the Holy Spirit," evidenced by ecstatic speech. Giggie argues that this act "was an unmistakable sign of the genuinely saved and more generally represented… [an advancement] to a higher level of perfection" (175). Charles Mason attended some of the meetings at Azusa Street, and brought the practice and ideas back to Black Holiness churches. Not all accepted the practice, and it caused a division between Mason and Jones who did not accept glossolalia. (175). The Pentecostal Movement is distinct but parallel to the Holiness movement. Glossolalia is a central part of Pentecostal theology, where, as Sanders explains, "some Holiness believers reject glossolalia altogether; others appreciate and/or practice speaking in tongues without insisting on the doctrine of tongues. The Holiness emphasis is on sanctification, or personal holiness, whereas the Pentecostals and Apostolics emphasize spiritual power" (5). Despite these differences, Sanders groups the churches together as Sanctified churches.

The term "sanctified" comes from the theology John Wesley introduced almost 100 years before the Black Holiness movement began. As Arthur Paris explains, Wesley's theology is based on the idea that believers have two important experiences in their religious life:

> First, conversion to justification and, second, Christian perfection or sanctification. In the first experience, the penitent was forgiven for his actual sins of commission, becoming a Christian but retaining a residue of sin. The remaining "inbred sin" was the result of Adam's fall and had to be dealt with by a second blessing, properly so-called. This experience purified the believer of inward sin, giving him "perfect love" toward God and man. (16)

Giggie suggests that both Baptist and Methodist churches had some common understanding of sanctification, but both "typically insisted that individuals underwent sanctification only after enduring long periods of prayer, scriptural study, and self-abnegation; that few Christians ever obtained it; and that when they did, it brought no guarantee of salvation or supernatural power" (175). Holiness churches, on the other hand, tended to preach that sanctification was not only possible, but frequently occurred in an instant during an ecstatic experience, such as those listed above. Churches that adopted the Pentecostal theology of speaking in tongues believed that glossolalia was the initial evidence of sanctification. Most Holiness churches believed that this sanctification brought spiritual authority and power to believers, as well as a responsibility for believers to separate themselves from the world.

Not only did sanctification offer believers spiritual authority and power, it offered opportunities to believers that they did not have in other churches. As Giggie says, the Holiness movement held "the idea that Christians of any rank or station in life could suddenly be sanctified and forever washed of sin" (168). Once sanctified, anyone could receive supernatural

messages from God, and as a result, spiritual authority. Unlike Baptist and Methodists churches, Holiness churches believed that "the Holy Spirit commonly spoke to individuals through dreams, visions, and trances despite Progressive views to the contrary... Holiness leaders openly validated it as a legitimate and credible source of spiritual empowerment" (181). Not only did they validate this kind of empowerment, this was the only qualification required for authority. Whereas Baptist and Methodist churches required special training for positions of leadership, "Holiness leaders constructed churches in which preachers need not be formally educated, only sanctified" (169). The result was that women, as well as the poor and illiterate, were offered opportunities to gain positions of power and authority that were not available to them in Baptist and Methodist congregations. It is important to acknowledge that these positions required believers to submit to certain fundamentalist theological positions, including the belief that the Bible is the literal and inerrant word of God. In this sense, the empowerment offered to the disenfranchised was limited and problematic, as they were unable to challenge these core fundamentalist beliefs. Despite this, it represented a shift from the Baptist and Methodist congregations, giving women, the poor, and the illiterate a chance to have a voice. Cheryl Sanders suggests that

> the Sanctified church begs for recognition as a place where poor black women and men have been empowered to do ministry since its inception during the late nineteenth century. The shifting patterns of inclusion and exclusion in these churches are governed by two primary factors, namely, the egalitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit, on one hand, and the impact of racist, sexist, and elitist societal norms on the other. (17)

This egalitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit established the basis of spiritual authority on sanctification and supernatural, ecstatic religious experience, rather than training and education.

With this sense of spiritual empowerment came a mandate for Holiness believers to make themselves separate from those who were not believers. As Giggie explains, "[p]lacing faith in the Holy Spirit to provide for their needs and wants, they followed a strict disciplinary code characterized by an unswerving devotion to keeping the body pure and the soul sinless. As a result, they avoided dancing, smoking, drinking alcohol, swearing, parading in public, wearing expensive clothing, and decorating with costly goods" (169). Many critics interpret this as a reaction against what Sanders calls the "racist, sexist and elitist societal norms" (17). Sanders argues that this mandate of separation is "based on a dialectical identity characteristic of tradition: 'in the world, but not of it.' This dialectical identity reflects the social aspect of exilic consciousness, as manifested in the saints' awareness of alienation or separation from the dominant culture, based on racial differences and religious practices" (6). She goes on to explain this in greater detail:

> What makes this process exilic is the connection made between the saints' rejection of the world and the world's rejection of the saints. The saints reject the world on the basis of biblically derived ascetic commitments, that is, the mandate to holiness; they are themselves "rejected" by the dominant host culture because of their race, and sometimes their sex and class... The saints are "in" a world that is sinful, oppressive, and discriminatory; they demonstrate that they are not "of" this world by purging themselves of its secularizing influences through rituals that meet their own criteria for cultural authenticity and biblical interpretation. In

> worship, the saints replicate the "other" world, the place where exile can be at home. (64)

Thus the rejection of the secular, sinful activities of the world is a way of privileging the spiritual empowerment of Holiness churches against the racist, sexist and classist society which rejected those in the Holiness churches.

As Black Holiness believers began to migrate from the South to the Northern American cities, they found themselves facing similar oppositional forces, and continued to rely on the church to sustain them. On one side was the dominant white society which, as Clarence Taylor suggests, "measured success by the rational accumulation of goods, education, and job status. In a racist society... African Americans were unable to meet the demands for success because they were closed out of avenues to upward social and economic mobility" (57). On the other side were the mainline African-American churches, like the Baptist and Methodist churches of the South. Taylor, focusing on Brooklyn, explains "many contended they were uncomfortable in the large churches and were unable to express themselves as they did in Southern churches" (55). Farah Griffin, writing primarily about Chicago, echoes Taylor arguing that "the Northern black church became a site of contestation between migrants and Northern-born members. In some instances, the migrants left larger established churches to found their own storefront churches" (61). These Holiness storefront churches offered the same connection to an African-American history, physical manifestations of God, spiritual empowerment and the insular safety of exilic rhetoric as Holiness churches in the South. The connection to African-American history became particularly important to believers in the Northern urban environments, as it not only provided a connection to slave religion and African religions beyond that, but also to the South that they had left behind. Griffin suggests that the storefront church "was a place where migrants could invoke

the South as a means of sustaining them in the city. They were spaces that provided information about the South, assisted migrants upon their arrival, and helped smooth their transition into the city" (62). Black Holiness churches allowed migrants to adjust to the North while providing them with similar benefits and protection that Holiness churches provided in the South.

Baldwin and the Black Holiness Tradition

While the black church has had many critics from African-American intellectual communities, including W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin is one of the few who directly address the Black Holiness movement. In her survey of black intellectuals and storefront religion, Sanders argues Baldwin's essays have a "special relevance" because of "his deep rootedness in and rejection of the Sanctified church" (111). Baldwin's clearest criticism, which he repeats frequently, relates to Christianity in general, rather than just the Holiness tradition: Christianity is inherently racist. William Hamilton summarizes this position, explaining that for Baldwin "the Christian God is indelibly white, even in Harlem in 1938, and that is why Christianity is an evil to be rejected" (80). Baldwin explains the initial problem with a white God in The Fire Next Time, where he describes his own conversion in a storefront Pentecostal church: "if His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far? Why?" (31). Baldwin says he never finds a satisfactory answer to that question. Instead, he finds a history of racism inherent in the Christian tradition, which appears sanctioned by God, confirming God's whiteness for Baldwin. Christianity, he argues, has become entangled with political power of nations. As a result,

> the spreading of the Gospel, regardless of the motives or the integrity or the heroism of some of the missionaries, was an absolutely indispensable justification

> for the planting of the flag… The Christian church itself… sanctified and rejoiced in the conquests of the flag, and encouraged, if it did not formulate, the belief that conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of the Western populations, was proof of the favor of God. (46)

Baldwin focuses on the "planting of the flag" especially as it relates to the colonization of Africa. God's favour of this colonization was expressed by "priests of that church which stands in Rome [who] gave God's blessing to Italian boys being sent out to ravage a defenseless black country -- which until that event, incidentally, had not considered itself to be black" (51). Baldwin condemns the church for sanctioning slavery as well as forcing Africans in Africa and those transported to America to accept Christianity, thus erasing their connection to African religions. The African-American must "accept that image [the colonizers] then gave him of himself" ("Many Thousands" 23). Baldwin makes this re-identification, and separation from African heritage, very personal in The Fire Next Time, when he writes "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… 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" (84). Although Baldwin's critique is aimed at Christianity as a whole, the emphasis on the white God supporting the racist actions of colonizers and slave owners undermines the connection between the Holiness tradition and African religions. To Baldwin, Christianity necessarily subjugates, mutilates, and redefines elements of African religions so that they are no longer recognizable; it forces African-Americans to accept a white God who condones and supports the oppression under which they suffer.

Baldwin also critiques the Black church specifically for the false sense of safety it offers its believers. In The Fire Next Time, Baldwin says that during the summer of his conversion he realized "that the moral barriers that [he] had supposed to exist between me and the dangers of a criminal career were so tenuous as to be nearly nonexistent" (23). This realization scared him, and "all the fears with which [he] had grown up, and which were now a part of [him] and controlled [his] vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and [him], and drove [him] into the church" (27). The church, he believed, would be a refuge from the world which scared him, because he "supposed that God and safety were synonymous. The word 'safety' brings us to the real meaning of the word 'religious' as we use it" (16). The safety offered by the church, against the world which was dangerous and full of rejection from a dominating white society, was a false safety. Baldwin found that, rather than a safe, loving environment, the church "was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair" (39). This self-hatred and despair is created and fostered, Baldwin believes, by adherence to a white religion which identifies blackness as evil. Upon realizing this, Baldwin says "I was even lonelier and more vulnerable than I had been before" (38). This vulnerability comes in spite of his position as a preacher at a very young age. Although he experienced the sense of empowerment available in the Holiness tradition, he saw this as false as well. He writes "I knew how I worked myself up into my own visions, and how frequently–indeed, incessantly–the visions God granted me differed from the visions He granted my father" (35). Although his criticism is largely filtered through his own experience in a Pentecostal church, Baldwin takes aim at both the exilic, insular positioning and the sense of empowerment which tend to be emphasized in the Holiness tradition. Both, he suggests, are false.

Baldwin also takes aim at the Black Holiness tradition's repression of sexuality. While the church emphasizes and encourages the physical experience of God, which results in bodily manifestations of that presence, it restricts and denies sexual impulses. In fact, in some cases, the bodily manifestations of the Holy Spirit becomes a replacement for sexual experiences, something that Baldwin hints at in The Fire Next Time. He says that when he converts to Christianity, he "surrendered to a spiritual seduction long before [he] came to any carnal knowledge" (29). Referring to his conversion as a "seduction" which prohibits "carnal knowledge" clearly suggests that the two are incompatible, and that one is intended to take the place of the other. Baldwin states that his budding sexuality causes him a great deal of guilt because of the way he has been raised, but that when he converts, he is "released, for the first time, from all [his] guilty torment" (32). This release, however, does not last long as shortly after his conversion, he spends "most of [his] time in a state of repentance for things [he] had vividly desired to do but had not done" (36). Not only does he repress his sensual desires, he feels guilty for having them in the first place. Thus his conversion has failed to provide him with any kind of lasting release. Baldwin later suggests that this condition plagues the entire United States, and argues that "something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as deeply as they do here, and become as joyless as they have become" (43). Baldwin puts a finer point on this in a later essay called "Preservation of Innocence," in which he attacks the notion that homosexuality is wrong because it is deemed "unnatural." Baldwin, instead, argues that "it is not in the sight of nature that the homosexual is condemned, but in the sight of God" (597). Baldwin suggests that homoerotic desire is a natural human need for "an incalculable number of the world's humans" and "that it is not possible to banish or to falsify any human need without ourselves undergoing falsification and loss" (597).

He acknowledges that violence, including murder, is also a natural human impulse that must not be ignored or denied. Instead he asks "is it possible not to embrace [murder]? For he is in us and of us. We may not be free until we understand him" (596). It is not Baldwin's intent here to equate homosexuality and murder, but rather to suggest that even the most dangerous and destructive human impulses must not be ignored in order for people to be free. Freedom of all kinds, including sexual freedom, is Baldwin's primary concern. He goes so far as to suggest that "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" (The Fire 47). Although Baldwin does not overtly say it, the implication of his writing is that the Christian God, the God of the Black Holiness tradition, fails to meet these basic qualifications.

Criticism of Go Tell It on the Mountain

Only a few critics have looked at Go Tell It on the Mountain in the context of the Black Holiness tradition. In fact, some critics purposely ignore the context. Michael Cobb, for example, argues "the religious modifiers that surround John as he struggles to find some descriptive unity in his appearance... do not reference the church, its history, or its religious beliefs as much as they reference John's corporeal confusion, his sinful and embarrassing bodily difference" (Racial 11). As a result, Cobb does not discuss "religion or religious history as religion is often described" and instead follows the example of Kenneth Burke, who suggests the study of religion should not focus on "man's [or woman's] relationship to God, but rather his relationship with the *word* 'God'" (Racial 11). What Cobb seems to overlook is the way the relationship to the word "God" is, in the novel, mediated and framed in a historical religious context, as is John's "corporeal confusion." Trudier Harris simply does not acknowledge the

distinctiveness of the Holiness tradition in her analysis of women in Go Tell It on the Mountain. She suggests that "in the world about which Baldwin writes, women may be the ones who open church services on Sunday night with their singing, but they are not ultimately the ones who can most frequently commune with God; the men do" (Black Women 30). The problem with this argument is that it is not entirely accurate. Harris does not cite any sources on the Holiness movement, which is precisely "the world about which Baldwin writes," and thus seems unaware of the role women played in those churches, the opportunities they had to "commune with God" which led them to positions of spiritual authority. This is not to suggest that the Holiness church maintained gender equality, but rather that the lines of the Holiness context are not "too sharply drawn… for complex development of characters" as Harris suggests (Black Women 12). An awareness of the context of the Holiness movement can not only add to the analysis of the novel, it can also help to avoid critical errors.

Clarence Hardy's James Baldwin's God is the most comprehensive examination of the Holiness context of Baldwin's work. He sees a progression in Baldwin's work, in which the rejection of the Holiness movement "takes its initial shape in Go Tell It and his early short stories and then crystallizes most notably in his later fiction and essays, where he adopts a less sanguine view of his personal conversion experience" (xiii). This puts Baldwin's first novel in a particularly interesting place. The objections to the church that Baldwin later expresses in The Fire Next Time are present in the novel, but are not as harsh, and seem to be partially balanced by some redeeming qualities. The result is that Go Tell It on the Mountain embodies some of the tensions described above. In his chapter on the novel, Hardy explores the tension between the links to African religions and racist theology in John's conversion, as well as the tension between the "safety" offered in the church and the oppression and despair that "safety" costs. He draws

on sources related to African rituals, anthropological and sociological studies of Holiness and Pentecostal churches, as well as historical information about the migration of African-Americans from the South to the North to conclude that, in Baldwin's earlier works, "the church is depicted as a repository of illusions that attempts but fails to ward off the possibilities of human secular activity and pleasures" (7). John's conversion, meanwhile, "can be seen as the entrance of a new member into an adult community, with all the status that it implies, or as an opportunity for a broader group to exercise social control on its individual members" (10). Hardy's analysis of the novel in its religious context does not provide a clear answer to questions surrounding John's conversion, but rather illuminates some of the tensions the conversion explores.

Both Peter Kerry Powers and Angelo Robinson look at Pentecostal/Holiness attitudes towards the body and desire, particularly homoerotic desire. Robinson concludes that "John is not 'cured,' 'healed,' or 'delivered' from his sexual desire during his rebirth; he is rather 'restored' to confront the reality of his sexual desires while at the same time claiming the promise of salvation in that reality" (349). Powers provides a much closer analysis of the tension between bodily desire and responsibility to the religious community, and how they are brought together through confession in the Black Holiness church and in Baldwin's novel. Powers suggests that "while John's conversion bridges the gulf of separation between self and others in the formation of community, it does so only by maintaining a gulf inside John himself between public role and private desire.... John's desire, finally, is still a love that dare not speak its name" (806). So, while both critics are aware of the religious context of the novel, they come to different conclusions about John's conversion, and how it impacts his homoerotic desire; for Powers, John must hide his desire in order to be part of the religious community, while for

Robinson, the conversion experience gives John the ability to live as an openly gay, saved black man.

The discrepancy between Powers and Robinson's interpretations is hardly surprising since the legitimacy and nature of John's conversion is perhaps the prevailing critical controversy related to the novel. Some critics have interpreted the experience as a genuine, evangelical conversion. Donald Gibson, for instance, argues that "[t]here is no irony or ambiguity present… [that] John's experience is a truly Christian one, that the novel is a Christian novel and that it points to what the author conceives to be a sphere of reality beyond the experiential" (6). James Coleman makes a similar argument, while acknowledging the troubling aspects of the Holiness tradition in the novel. Referring to Romans 8:28, which states "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (KJV), Coleman argues "the novel reveals… the possibility that all things—including Gabriel's hatred and racial oppression grounded in the socially constructed symbolism of blackness as sin—through faith in the Word of God can lead to the (en)light(tenment) that frees" (44). Similarly, Michael Lynch suggests that "in Go Tell It on the Mountain Baldwin censures not Christian theology per se but its misapplication among many of the professed Christendom" ("Glimpse" 37) and that "Baldwin presents John's ecstatic experience of direct knowledge of God without irony… . Baldwin emphasizes the vision as a glimpse of the hidden God, a momentary apparition such as a mystic might be granted with the potential to transform his life" (50). Robert Lunden also argues there is no irony in the depiction of John's conversion, and suggests that those who find irony "use The Fire Next Time as a starting-point for their discussion. They have consciously, or subconsciously come to Baldwin's novel to secure evidence that John's conversion, like Baldwin's, is a 'gimmick' and a 'spiritual seduction'. But

they have found little support in the text of the novel for their theories" (114). All of these critics see the tension in the novel as a tension between characters who practice religion, rather than between the characters and the religion itself, or between the characters and God. In their view, the noel celebrates the conversion as a legitimate event that welcomes John into a new, Christian, spiritual existence.

For other critics, John's new spiritual existence goes beyond what might traditionally be referred to as "Christian" to something better. Stanley Macebuth, who extracts the theology presented throughout the novel, suggests that John finds "conditional release from the power of God's vengeance… a new beginning, a new religion" (67). Similarly, Melvin Dixion argues that "Go Tell It on the Mountain tells a radically different story all the better: John's triumph over religion, John's salvation and witness above the line measuring the tightly drawn borders of religious fundamentalism" (126). Brian Norman goes so far as to argue that "the Black Church does not save John; John saves the Black Church" because his conversion "is a collective salvation that cannot disassociate itself from all African Americans living in a 'wicked' world of poverty, racism, and the duplicity of American democracy" (23). Like Robinson, these critics argue John's conversion brings together elements that are normally separated in traditional Christianity. For all of these critics, this means the acceptance of love, especially homoerotic love, in the context of a spiritual awakening.

Critics have also viewed John's conversion as a metaphor for a different kind of change that John undergoes. Shirley Allen, more so than any other critic, unpacks the Biblical allusions spread throughout the text. She sees these allusions as a way of universalizing John's experience, which she interprets as an entrance into adulthood, since "John's struggle on the threshing floor is described in terms of birth imagery, and the accomplished delivery sets him

free from the womb of childhood" ("Ironic" 26). Csaba Csapó builds on Allen's interpretation, drawing out not only the birthing imagery but the homoerotic imagery of John's experiences and visions. He concludes that "Johnny's conversion functions as a kind of realization of his homosexuality as well as his defiance against God" ("Defiance" 318). While both Allen and Csapó draw out important aspects of John's experience related to adulthood and homoerotic desire, both fail to integrate the details of the religious context into their interpretations.

While the interpretations of John's experience above seem to be positive, not all critics have read John's experience in that way. Some have interpreted it as a legitimate conversion that the novel condemns rather than celebrates. This is largely because, like Powers, they interpret his conversion as an act that suppresses his homoerotic desires. Cobb argues that this is evident because conversion, "something so normal for this novel's religious community is so painful for John, who wanted 'another life', one that is not religious, one that does not tell him that his queer desires are sinful" (268). Cobb's interpretation is hampered by the lack of religious context in his analysis, since the "pain" John experiences is common in the ecstatic religious experiences described by Sanders and others. However, he does point to an earlier passage in which John sees academics as his means of escaping his oppressive step-father into a new life. Charles Scruggs also cites this passage when he suggests that "[f]inding Christ is less than a victory because John can no longer be an explorer of life's possibilities; but his conversion is much more than a defeat because… he is given a haven until he has acquired the strength and patience to live in the world" (15). Scruggs' description of the conversion is ambiguous because he sees the church as a safe place. Edward Margolies, however, does not see it as a safe place, but rather a place where characters exist in a "private hell… misery will be alleviated in the communal act of prayer but ultimately their despair is immovable" (114). In these readings, John sacrifices his

ambitions and homoerotic desire for safety, which some view as false. This sacrifice could be temporary or permanent, but either way, none of the critics view the sacrifice as something the novel celebrates.

Finally, critics have also argued that the conversion experience does not bring about any change at all in John. Barbra Olson is perhaps the most tentative in this argument, suggesting that, "while it is true that young John Grimes enters the church, it is also true that his conversion to Christianity and his incorporation into the church community are suspect. Do we have here a spiritual reality or a psychological illusion? Do we have a subjugation to the group or an integration into it?" (7). Other critics are more definitive. Michael Fabre unequivocally states, "John remains the prisoner of the definition imposed by Gabriel; he does not acquire his adult identity in a true mystical experience… The illumination of the soul is limited to a spark without a future, to a spasm of sensibility in search of love. True knowledge is absent, rebirth impossible" (133). Nagueyalti Warren is similarly definitive when he argues "One thing is clear, however; John is not a believer… He has lost blind faith in a dogma that would repress his sexuality, that would deny his inherent divinity, that would not allow him to find God in himself… there was no real salvation" (26). Arguing something very similar, Sondra O'Neale sets John's conversion in the context of Baldwin's opinions of the church expressed in his later writings. According to O'Neale, "Baldwin does not really believe in the possibility of a spiritual epiphany to lift the black man above the environment of his anguish. At least he seems to accept the prevailing social theories that treat Christianity as simply a force to keep black people insensitive to the need for more immediate freedom. Both aspects can be seen in John Grimes' conversion" (131). For these critics, John's conversion simply perpetuates the relationships, power structures, and beliefs that existed before his conversion. Rather than empower, or

conversely further subjugate John, the experience is simply a continuation of what has already been taking place.

Remarkably, no critics use theories of religious experience to interpret John's conversion. When these theories are mentioned, it is only in passing. In the introduction to James Baldwin's God, Hardy cites Ann Tave's claim that "experience of religion cannot be separated from the communities of discourse and practice that give rise to it *without becoming something else*" (in Hardy xiv). He uses Tave's theory to contextualize his exploration of Baldwin's works in relation to the Holiness tradition, but does not mention Tave again in the book. Victor Strandberg's analysis of the novel in relation to religious experience theory is even less illuminating. In a book relating American Literature to the works of William James, he briefly mentions a passage in Go Tell It on the Mountain as an example of glossolalia, but offers no real analysis of the text. Meanwhile, Miram Sivan briefly mentions the theories of Mercea Eliade, but only in passing. Why would critics ignore the vast work and numerous theories on religious experience available when approaching religious experience in a work of literature? Cobb offers a possible explanation. He suggests that "the resistance to critical engagement with religious rhetoric has much to do with a huge volume of religious studies scholarship constantly elaborating the dichotomized relationship between 'the sacred and the profane,' scholarship that has an interest in maintaining a privileged category of the sacred" ("Pulpitic" 294). He cites the examples of Emile Durkheim's Elementary Forms of the Religious Life published in 1911 and Mircea Eliade's The Sacred and the Profane published in 1959 as examples of this "huge volume". What he does not mention is that, while the works of Durkheim and Eliade have contributed a great deal to the study of religion, especially religious rituals and rites, they have been frequently and consistently critiqued by contemporary religious scholars for the

sacred/profane dichotomy. Valerie Saiving, for example, in her 1975 essay "Androcentrism in Religious Studies" takes aim at Eliade's separation of the sacred and profane as it relates to gendered rites and rituals. She suggests that Eliade's "resolution of the apparent inconsistency between viewing women as sacred in the context of their own rites and as profane in the context of men's rites" (186) is inadequate. According to Saiving, women are only afforded a "subhuman sacrality" (190) in Eliade's dichotomy. As a result she calls into question Eliade's notion of the sacred, suggesting that there are different, competing notions of sacredness rather than a universal one. She also suggests that the line between the sacred and profane is not as defined as Eliade suggests. The critique of the sacred/profane dichotomy is so pervasive in Religious Studies research from the mid-seventies onward that Cobb's characterization of Religious Studies rhetoric demonstrates a lack of awareness of the field. Perhaps if critics were more aware of recent theories concerning religious experience, they would be less likely to shy away from using those theories.

The "huge volume of religious studies scholarship" that Michael Cobb identifies is much more diverse that he suggests. In The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion, Jerome Gellman lists 14 different aspects of religious experience that philosophers discuss and debate. These include how to define and categorize religious experiences (see Nelson Pike, Ninian Smart); whether religious experiences are beyond linguistic description (see Richard Gale, Wayne Proudfoot, William Alston); whether there are common elements in all religious experiences (see Walter Stace, R. C. Zaehner); the degree to which religious experiences are influenced or constructed by culture (Jess Hollenback, Rufus Jones, Katz); the degree to which naturalistic explanations (i.e. neuropsychological explanations) are useful when discussing religious experience (see Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg, James Austin, Michael

Persinger), etc. Each of these questions has given rise to a controversy among various philosophers. Scholars outside the Philosophy of Religion have also developed approaches to studying religious experience. For example, Victor Turner focuses on the ritualistic aspects of religious experiences. This has raised questions of its own about what can be referred to as a ritual, the place of secular rituals in the study of Religion, etc. This is hardly a unified collection of work, as Cobb suggests, but rather a wide variety of approaches that often contradict each other.

Religious Experience Theory and Go Tell It on the Mountain

In this thesis I use three different theories of religious experience to help clarify the ways Baldwin uses religious experiences to explore the intersection between religious practices, sexuality, and racial tension in the Black Holiness tradition. On their own, some of these theories may border on theology rather than a more conventional literary theory, yet they reveal important and interesting elements of the novel. The world of Go Tell It on the Mountain is a theological world. Not only do the characters themselves follow a theology, but a version of the Christian God arguably appears as a character in the novel. Rather than promote or celebrate this Christian understanding of God, Baldwin critiques it, especially as it appears in the Black Holiness context of the novel. These theories, then, provide a way of understanding the focus and scope of Baldwin's critique in the novel: they provide ways of breaking down religious experience into parts and finding what significance the novel gives each of each of those parts; they provide ways of uncovering the underlying theological assumptions inherent in the practices of the characters, and ways of linking those assumptions to race relations; they provide a contrast through which it is easier to see where and how Baldwin breaks away from the

idealized, Protestant expectations of conversion experiences. In essence, these theories become tools for understanding the ways that the religious experiences function in the novel.

Louis Dupré's theories of religious experience are perhaps the most theological of the three. Drawing on the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx, Dupré argues that religious experiences are distinct from cultural and ideological contexts. He acknowledges that the conditions that facilitate these experiences and the interpretation afterward are both dictated by cultural and ideological contexts, but that the experience itself is not. In fact, he even suggests that, rather than the context creating the experience, the experience might be created for the context. He argues that "revelation consists of both the experience and its given possibility, that is, its interpretative orientation" (117). In other words, the revelation that accompanies a religious experience is a result of the way the experience itself mixies with the cultural context in which it occurs. In Chapter One, I use Dupré's theory as a way of breaking down John's vision into three parts: the context, the experience itself, and the revelation it provides to John. John's vision in Go Tell It on the Mountain seems surreal and dense with symbolism, but Dupré's theory helps to show that after the vision, John understands that God is separate from his father, and that if he endures suffering, a reward is waiting for him. Dupré's theory does much more than this. It shows how the context of African-Americans during the 1930s interacts with Black Holiness theology, and ultimately, how that theology inadequately addresses racial injustice.

Baldwin's critique of how Black Holiness interacts with racial injustice goes beyond John's vision. The novel uses altar rituals to depict how pervasive this theology becomes in Black Holiness congregations and how it impacts the lives of characters. In order to fully examine how the altar rituals, and the language Baldwin uses to describe them, works to deepen this critique, I use the theories of Ron Grimes in Chapter Two. Grimes is an anthropologist who

has developed a ritual theory of religious experiences. Building on the work of Victor Turner and Mircea Eliade, Grimes suggests that "ritual action must carry its meaning inside itself… without inserting abstract statements of meaning in the middle" (159). He insists that ritual be as meaningful as myth and theology in Religious Studies, not simply viewed as a reflection of myth and theology. While most of his work focuses on the anthropological study of religion, Reading, Writing and Ritualizing attempts to incorporate his theories into literary criticism. He suggests five ways of approaching ritual aspects in fiction. In Chapter Two of my thesis, I focus on his mimetic approach, which examines "ritual as depicted or alluded to in fiction" (134). Following Grimes' brief example of how this is done, I pay close attention to how the altar rituals are described in the novel, with particular emphasis on phrases like "going down" or "rising up." These descriptions reveal the deeper power of the altar rituals for rejuvenation within the church. These same phrases appear in language describing situations outside the church, revealing that the characters believe that the same principles that empower the ritual inside the church apply outside. Baldwin shows that while the theological principles work in the church, they do not work outside the church. African-Americans who believe in those principles in both the inside and outside spheres are left to passively endure racial injustice while they wait for God's perpetually deferred intervention.

No discussion of conversion experiences would be complete without at least some reference to William James. James explores the nature of religious experiences, especially conversion experiences, in The Varieties of Religious Experience published in 1902. He argues that conversion has practical benefits for the individual and the community at large, rather than simply theological ones. While critics like Lynn Bridgers and Charles Taylor have tried to incorporate James' theories into contemporary scientific and philosophical thought, others, like

Wayne Proudfoot and Richard Rorty, have pointed out that the practical benefits James illustrates reveal a prominent Protestant bias. In other words, while James writes about the practical benefits of conversions, they are idealized Protestant conversions. This Protestant bias casts serious doubt on the reliability of James' conclusions, but it is an asset when applying his theories to Go Tell It on the Mountain. In Chapter Three I use James' descriptions of the practical benefits of conversion as a point of contrast for the conversions of Gabriel and John in the novel. Both characters seem to match up in the early stages of their conversions, but not in the later stages. For James, the principle benefit of conversion is an escape from despair, but in the novel, characters are unable to escape despair caused by sexual repression and racially motivated oppression. Instead, this despair haunts them no matter how tightly they try to cling to the ideals and theology of the Black Holiness tradition. Again, Baldwin critiques the Black Holiness tradition for offering false promises to African-Americans, which in turn distracts them from the actual causes of their suffering.

While Baldwin does not shy away from strong criticism of the Black Holiness tradition and the way it encourages believers to react passively to racial injustice, he also shows a great deal of sensitivity and understanding for characters participating in the tradition. Even John's angry, abusive stepfather Gabriel struggles with his desire and the impact of racial injustice on his life. The Black Holiness tradition promises these characters an escape from racial injustice and from their despair, but it is an offer the tradition cannot keep. Despite this, African-Americans in the novel seem to have little choice. There are very few options for them. Those who choose to reject the church either repent in the end or suffer violent deaths. The underlying critique in the novel, then, is of an American society which puts African-Americans in the impossible position of accepting false promises or giving up hope entirely.

Chapter 1

"If We But Wait Our Change Will Come:" Louis Dupré, Theodicy and John's Vision

Near the beginning of Go Tell It on the Mountain, Elizabeth Grimes notices that something is troubling her son John as they sit down for breakfast. She comforts him, telling him: "there's a whole lot of things you don't understand. But don't you fret. The Lord'll reveal to you in His own good time everything He wants you to know" (26). John is torn between the Black Holiness tradition, the way of his abusive step-father, and the streets, where he sees whites enjoying all the pleasures he dreams about. Later in the novel he receives a revelatory vision while lying on the dusty floor of a 1930s Black Holiness church in Harlem. In the vision, he descends into darkness where he sees armies of African-Americans moaning and suffering. They participate in Black Holiness rituals, all the while dripping in blood. Even worse, John realizes he belongs with the suffering African-Americans, and that there seems to be no escape for him. John cries out to God to "lift him up" but instead God tells him to "go through" (205) and gives him joy and strength with which to endure his suffering.

Critics have struggled with this vision. Where most focus on the context and aftermath of the vision, Shirley Allen gives the imagery significant critical attention. For her, Baldwin describes the events of John's vision "in terms of birth imagery" ("Ironic" 26), which leads her to interpret the experience as John's transition into adulthood. Csaba Csapó looks at the same passages but reads homoerotic imagery as well, which leads him to conclude that John not only realizes his adulthood in his experience, but also "his homosexuality" ("Defiance" 318). Neither Allen nor Csapó address the relationship between the vision and the Black Holiness tradition, specifically, the way John perceives the tradition. Critics who do look at the novel in its religious context, such as Charles Hardy, Peter Kerry Powers and Robinson Angelo, do not

address or interpret the imagery in the vision. In this chapter I draw on Louis Dupré's theory of religious experience to interpret how John's vision relates to the Black Holiness context, specifically to the Black Holiness notion of a Church/World dichotomy and the relationship between God and African-American suffering.

Dupré and Religious Experience

In "Experience and Interpretation: a Philosophical reflection on Schillebeeckx's Theology," Louis Dupré builds on Edward Schillebeeckx's theology to construct a method of interpreting and understanding religious experiences. Dupré suggests that there are three components to a subject's interpretation of a religious experience. First, there is the interpretive orientation of the subject, which is essentially "the [cultural] models, concepts, ideologies, expectations" which the subject has before the religious experience (117). Second is the "primary interpretation" which is part of the experience itself, and guides the subject to determine "which cultural models will be adopted and which ones will be rejected" during the final stage of interpretation (116). Dupré suggests that "since [the primary interpretation] conditions the very possibility of a revelatory experience, the primary interpretation cannot be detached from that experience" (116). In other words, the primary interpretation is part of the experience itself. Finally there is the reflective interpretation. This occurs during the experience and afterwards. On this level, the subject uses the cultural models suggested by the primary interpretation to frame, articulate, and find meaning in the experience. Furthermore, Dupré views these experiences as containing a message from God. These religious experiences are therefore "from the beginning both totally culturally conditioned and God-given" (117). In other words, God not only provides the subject with the experiences, but guides the subject to the

appropriate cultural models with which to interpret the experiences. In this way, God creates experiences which are designed to interact with cultural contexts in a specific way in order to provide subjects with specific revelations.

It may seem strange to use a theory which centres around a Christian concept of God to interpret a work by James Baldwin who strongly critiques the Christian concept God throughout his writing. As early as his 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" Baldwin critiques traditional Christianity as a "merciless doctrine" (14) which forces a black man to accept "a theology that denies him life" (18). In the context of Go Tell It on the Mountain, however, God exists as a character who communicates with John through a religious experience that is specifically designed to interact with John's cultural and religious context in order to provide a specific message. In this sense, the character of God in the novel, and the religious experience God gives John, work in precisely the way that Dupré describes in his theory. Baldwin uses this experience to critique and dismantle the notion that there is any place, especially the church, where African-Americans can go to escape the suffering inflicted by the racist practices in America during the 1930s. This does not mean that Baldwin accepts the theological premises that Dupré puts forward in his theories, or even the theological premises that seem to be represented in the world of the novel. Quite the contrary. In addition to his critique of the myth of safety in the Black Church, Baldwin also puts forward a more nuanced, and perhaps even uncertain, critique of traditional African-American theodicy (theology which addresses the relationship between God and African-American suffering) which suggests that African-Americans should passively wait for God to take action on their behalf. This critique is not as direct, or as uncompromising as Baldwin's critique in his autobiographical work The Fire Next Time, but it is present nonetheless. In fact, in Go Tell It on the Mountain, it is possible to see the

positive aspects of God's response to African-American suffering. It is as if Baldwin is torn over how to approach or deal with a God who seems to offer African-Americans assistance in enduring suffering, but does not alleviate the suffering even though it seems to be in God's power to do so. Dupré's theory, then, not only serves to clarify what message the character of God sends to John, but what Baldwin is saying about the traditional concept of God in the Black Holiness Church. John's revelation in the novel disrupts his view of a church/world dichotomy, and replaces it with a heaven/earth dichotomy that allows him the opportunity to experience heavenly joy. More importantly, the revelation and the novel position God as a character willing to ease the suffering of African-Americans, but unwilling to rescue them from it entirely.

John's Interpretive Orientation

John's interpretive orientation stems from the Black Holiness dichotomy of the Church and the World. This is the dichotomy in which his parents believe and which they teach their children. Gabriel makes a clear division between those in the Black Holiness church and the white world since, according to him, "all white people were wicked, and that God was going to bring them low" (30). In essence, Gabriel rejects the dominant white culture which rejects him and other African-Americans. This reflects what Cheryl Sanders describes as the "exilic" dichotomy of the Black Holiness tradition (6). She explains that "what makes this process exilic is the connection made between the saints' rejection of the world and the world's rejection of the saints" (64). Gabriel's rejection of whites is not based solely on theological principles, but is also a reaction to their rejection of him. His rejection is an attempt to gain power, whereas John's mother, Elizabeth, rejects white culture out of fear. Roy, John's brother, complains that their mother "think[s] that's all that's in the world is jails and churches" (18). She responds by

saying "there ain't no safety except you walk humble before the Lord" (18). Elizabeth has seen, first hand, the pain and suffering racism in America causes. She watches Richard suffer psychological trauma after his arrest, a trauma which ultimately leads him to commit suicide. Elizabeth has retreated into the church believing it provides safety from that racism, believing she can escape it. The composite of these two views presents the world as predominantly white, evil and dangerous, whereas the Black Holiness church is righteous and safe.

John, however, sees the characteristics of these two sides differently than his parents, and is torn between them at the beginning of the novel. For John, the Black Holiness tradition is, above all, the side of his abusive step father. Gabriel's abuse is both emotional and physical. John believes, for example, that he is ugly and evil because "his father had always said that his face was the face of Satan" (20). Gabriel reinforces this belief, not only with words, but with physical punishment. John becomes convinced that his identity is fused with the "wickedness for which his father beat him and to which he clung in order to withstand his father" (13). John, convinced that he is sinful, retreats into that sin in order to resist Gabriel. For John, resisting Gabriel means also resisting the church. He sees Gabriel as a representative of God, and therefore, Gabriel's anger as representative of God's anger. During a church service, for example, he notices how "his father's face, always awful, became more awful now; his father's daily anger was transformed into prophetic wrath" (7). This connection between his father's anger and prophetic wrath, a wrath which is the expression of God's wrath, links his father's abusive behaviour to God. This connection grows stronger later in the novel when John contemplates Gabriel's violent temper. Even though people in the church respect Gabriel, "this man, God's minister, had struck John's mother, and John had wanted to kill him" (46). John is unable, at this point, to consider the possibility that Gabriel's abusive temper does not reflect

God's feelings toward him. He sees his father as "God's minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father" (14). Later in the novel, John is able to imagine what might happen if he were to convert: he would "no longer fear his father, for he could take, as it were, their quarrel over his father's head to Heaven—to the Father who loved him… he and his father would be equals, in the sight, and the sound, and the love of God. Then his father could not beat him any more, or despise him any more, or mock him any more—he, John, the Lord's anointed" (144). John, however, does not want to reconcile with Gabriel because "he wanted to hate him, to cherish that hatred and give his hatred words one day… He could not imagine, on any day to come and no matter how greatly he might be changed, wanting to take his father's hand" (144). It is not a rejection of God, or Christianity, which prevents him from converting to Christianity, but his hatred of his stepfather Gabriel.

Even if John were somehow able to overcome his hatred of Gabriel and convert to Christianity, he envisions his subsequent life to be similar to Gabriel's life. If he chooses to convert, "there awaited him only humiliation forever; there awaited him, one day, a house like his father's house, a church like his father's, and a job like his father's, where he would grow old and black with hunger and toil" (28). This goes beyond the hatred he feels for Gabriel to a broader understanding of the Black Holiness lifestyle, a lifestyle connected to suffering, striving, and most importantly, humiliation. Part of the humiliation John wants to avoid is connected to what he sees as his sin. Although the novel does not definitively identify John's "sin," it seems to imply that it is connected to homoerotic desire. John feels guilt over sinning "with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in

himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak" (11). This represents the beginning of John's sexual awakening as a gay man, a lifestyle condemned in the Black Holiness church. Csapó points out that John's awakening is "characterized by silence and thus secrecy... [which] is one prevailing code of homosexuality in Western culture; Christianity named homosexuality by not naming it" ("Race" 65-6). For John, then, the path of Black Holiness is one which restricts him to difficult cultural and economic conditions, and which causes him to feel humiliated about his sexuality, which he feels he must hide. It is a life of despair.

In contrast to the Black Holiness path of his parents is the world, specifically the white world John sees. This is a world "where people did not live in the darkness of his father's house, did not pray to Jesus in the darkness of his father's church, where he could eat good food, and wear fine clothes, and go to the movies as often as he wished. In this world John, who his father said was ugly... became immediately beautiful" (12). John draws very clear contrasts between the Church and the World in this passage. In the world, he imagines he would be able to enjoy the pleasures of good food and fine clothes, whereas in the Black Holiness tradition he would be restricted by economic difficulties and religious edicts. Similarly, he would be able to participate in what the church viewed as worldly activities, like going to the movies. Most importantly, John imagines the world accepting him, even seeing him as beautiful, which would counteract his step-father's assertion that he is ugly. At this point, then, John sees the world as an accepting place where he can partake in pleasures unavailable to him in the Black Holiness tradition. Even as John ponders these benefits of the world, he acknowledges that to follow this path would be "to hurl away, for a moment of ease, the glories of eternity... [which] were unimaginable" (28). In other words, even if John chose to side with the world, he would still interpret it through the eyes of the Black Holiness tradition: he would understand that he is committing himself to an

eternity in Hell in exchange for enjoyment on Earth. John is left struggling "to find a compromise between the way that led to life everlasting and the way that ended in the pit... not daring to feel it God's injustice that he must make so cruel a choice" (34-5).

John's dilemma between the white world he desires and the Black Holiness tradition he despises assumes that John would be able to join the world, the white world, and partake of its pleasures. John soon realizes that "this world was not for him. If he refused to believe, and wanted to break his neck trying, then he could try until the sun refused to shine; they would never let him enter" (31). Instead of the white world he imagines, all that is available to him is the world of the Black streets. John only has glimpses of these streets. When the family heads to church on Sunday mornings, for example, they pass men and women who "had spent the night in bars, or in cat houses, or on the streets, or on the rooftops, or under the stairs" (4). This is not the accepting, pleasurable environment that John imagines the white world to be, but rather a world where, on Sunday morning, the men are "wearing their Saturday-night clothes, wrinkled and dusty now, muddy-eyed and muddy-faced; and women with harsh voices and tight, bright dresses, cigarettes between their fingers or held tightly in the corners of their mouths" (4). John does not desire to be a part of this world, as he does with the white world. Instead, he is "embarrassed" by the spectacle (4). Not only is it embarrassing, it is frightening and violent. John's other glimpse into the Black streets comes as he and Roy spy on a heterosexual couple having sex. After they are finished "the woman had wanted fifty cents, and the man had flashed a razor" (4). The sight makes John "afraid" and he no longer wants to spy on people copulating in the Black streets (5). In spite of this, Roy's stabbing reminds John of the violence which threatens him on the Black streets. Although Roy's injury is not serious, and it results in more violence from Gabriel, it serves as another reminder for John that the streets carry the threat of

violence, perhaps even more so than his step-father's house. John's choice, then, is between a despairing, poor, repressed life as a Black Holiness believer, and that of danger and frustration of a man trying to escape the Black community into the white community.

The Primary Interpretation in John's Vision

When John's religious experience begins during a prayer service, his understanding of the Church/World dichotomy remains intact. This dichotomy first manifests itself in the "malicious, ironic voice" he hears while lying on the floor (196). Critics have disagreed about the identity of the voice, interpreting it as Satan (Lundén 124), Richard, John's biological father (Porter, "The South" 117), "the voice of the earthly city, urbane and cynical" (Scruggs 13), the voice of reason (Warren 25) and the voice of unbelief (Allen 49). I am not as concerned with the voice's identity as with its message, which reinforces John's initial understanding of the Church/World dichotomy. The voice "insist[s] that he rise—and, at once, to leave this temple and go out into the world... if he did not want to become like all the other niggers" (196). In this instance, the voice distinguishes between the "niggers" in the church around John, who suffer the despair and repression of the Black Holiness existence, and the life outside the church, which is different. The voice later makes the connection between Gabriel and the Black Holiness tradition clear as well, challenging John by telling him: "Get up... Don't let [Gabriel] keep you here. You got everything your daddy got" (198). Here, the voice echoes John's earlier reluctance to convert, since it means that he would also have to submit to his step-father. John wants to get up off the floor, but is unable to stand. Instead he falls deeper into darkness, where a surreal version of the city surrounds him. Again, John is caught between his step-father, this time brandishing a knife and threatening to kill John, and the white city. At this stage, he sees

"his father's will as stronger than John's own. His power [is] greater because he belonged to God" (198). John tries to escape his step-father into the streets of the white world, "but there was no deliverance in this street for him" (201), just as earlier in the novel, John finds himself trapped between two options neither of which is satisfactory.

Finding himself caught between the Church and the World again, John cries out to God. It is then that John is given the primary interpretation which provides an alternate way of understanding his position and his relation to God. John begins to see that African-Americans in the church and in the street both suffer in the same way. This is primarily manifested in the sound of moaning:

> he had heard it everywhere, in prayer and in daily speech, and wherever the saints were gathered, and in the unbelieving streets... Yes, he had heard it all his life, but it was only now that his eyes were opened to this sound that came from darkness, that could only come from darkness, that yet bore such witness to the glory of the light... It was a sound of rage and weeping... rage that had no language, weeping with no voice—which yet spoke now, to John's startled soul, of boundless melancholy, of the bitterest patience, and the longest night; of humility most wretched, the dungeon most absolute, of love's bed defiled, and birth dishonored, and most bloody unspeakable, sudden death. Yes the darkness hummed with murder: the body in the water, the body in the fire, the body on the tree. (203)

The description of the moaning is reminiscent of racial violence both during and after slavery. John is aware of this violence early in the novel as he reads "about the things white people did to colored people... cheated them of their wages, and burned them, and shot them... He had read

about colored men being burned in the electric chair for things they had not done; how in riots they were beaten with clubs; how they were tortured in prisons" (30). Early in the novel, however, John does not make the connection between this racial violence and the African-Americans around him. The vision makes this connection clear for him. It is even stronger, later in the vision, when John sees members of his congregation perform communion, foot washing and baptismal rituals, all the while dripping with "unholy blood" (206). The blood is the blood of racial violence. John has already seen the blood caused by violence in the streets on his brother, Roy. The moaning and the bloody imagery break down the dichotomy between the two the world and the Church. On one hand, John understands that African-Americans who chose to leave the Church and venture into the white world suffer the wounds of racism. On the other, he understands that staying in the Church and performing the rituals of the church does not save African-Americans from these same wounds. African-Americans in both spheres suffer in the same way, and express their suffering with the same sound.

Not only does John see and hear the same suffering in both spheres, he recognizes it in himself. He hears the sound of moaning, the same sound he hears in the streets and the church, "in himself—it rose from his bleeding, his cracked-open heart" (203). This aligns him with the "armies of darkness" which he sees enduring the suffering (203): "They were the despised and rejected, the wretched and the spat upon, the earth's offscouring; and he was in their company… The stripes they had endured would scar his back, their punishment would be his, their portion his, his their humiliation, anguish, chains, their dungeon his, their death his" (204). John has seen that racial injustice underlies the suffering in both the streets and the Church. Now he sees that racial injustice also underlies his suffering, that his suffering is the same as the suffering of the African-Americans around him. At first he resists this inclusion, and looks around for

someone to help him, but he sees even his mother has been "claimed by this army" (205). With no one left to help, he cries out to God several times to "lift [him] up" (205) and save him from the suffering those around him try to endure. A voice, presumably the voice of God, answers that he must "go through" (205). John is unable to escape this suffering in the streets, in the Church, even by calling out to God and converting.

When God appears, it is above and against this darkness and suffering. After witnessing the failure of the Black Holiness rituals to provide an escape from racial violence, and calling out to God several times for mercy, at last "John saw the Lord—for a moment only; and the darkness, for a moment only, was filled with a light he could not bear" (207). The emphasis on light, here, contrasts this moment with the darkness, as well as the sound of moaning "that came from darkness, that could only come from darkness" (203), that fills both the Church and the streets. It also distances his step-father, who is part of the darkness, from God. Many critics miss this point. Csapó suggests that "there is no significant difference between God, Gabriel, and the racist and heterosexist society that emerges as a threat to destroy him. The God of Go Tell It on the Mountain appears vengeful and loveless" (Csapó, "Defiance" 320). Trudier Harris echoes Csapó arguing that "[f]or John, Gabriel might just as well be all the white policemen in the world and God the Father combined; that is the extent of control that John feels Gabriel has over his life" (Black Women 27-8). Likewise, Stanley Macebuth suggests that "in John's mind there is hardly any distinction between the capriciousness of God's threat to his existence and the intensity of his father's hatred for him" (56). While this may have been true at the beginning of the novel, the vision helps John separate the two. Since God is above and against the darkness and suffering, and his father is in the darkness and suffering, John can follow God without necessarily following his father. The vision of God does not rescue him from the darkness, but

John has been given a taste of heaven, which he had previously been unable to imagine. It allows him to imagine a world beyond the suffering in the darkness in the form of "a city, way in the middle of the air,/ Waiting, waiting, waiting up there" (207). While John is unable to reach this heavenly city, and thus escape the conditions which throw him into despair earlier in the novel, he has been given both a glimpse of what awaits him after death, as well as the understanding that the light can break into the darkness to give him a small portion of heavenly joy. Baldwin describes it in terms of an embrace: "the light and the darkness had kissed each other, and were married now, forever, in the life and the vision of John's soul" (207). By leveling the previous dichotomy between the Black Holiness believers and the world, and creating a new dichotomy between earthly existence and heavenly existence, the vision provides John with a way of understanding the meaning of his vision, and what he should do next.

John's Reflective Interpretation

Although John's reflective interpretation is not complete by the end of the novel, it begins to form as soon as he gets up off the floor. John begins to associate the Black Holiness believers around him with Biblical characters such as Job, Moses, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, even Judas. Despite his use of Old Testament characters, John imagines that all of them "looked unto Jesus, the author and finisher of their faith, running with patience the race He had set before them; they endured the cross, and they despised the shame, and had waited to join Him, one day, in glory, at the right hand of the Father" (208). John's understanding of these Biblical characters, and by extension the Black Holiness believers around him, clearly reflects Hebrews 12:

> let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. (*KJV* Heb. 12.1-2)

John now understands the Black Holiness path as one of endurance for a final reward in Heaven. Joy, the only element missing from John's appraisal when compared to the passage from Hebrews, comes a few pages later when John rises from the floor. He recognizes "he was filled with a joy, a joy unspeakable" (221) which earlier in the novel he could not understand and thought he would never be able to access. Now that he has experienced it, he sees it as part of a circular existence of believers: "Out of joy strength came, strength that was fashioned to bear sorrow: sorrow brought forth joy" (221). Not only does John see his task as that of enduring until he gets to heaven, but he sees God as providing enough joy to endure the sorrow that besets him on earth. God has already given him a touch of joy in his vision, and John believes God will continue to provide enough joy for him to endure the cross of racism, and the cross of his abusive step father. As Sivan suggests, John "is now better equipped to deal with Gabriel's relentless criticism and contempt" (7). Most importantly, however, John understands himself as saved. He has laid claim to the promise of eternal happiness and heaven.

The Character of God and Theodicy

What, then, does this say about the character of God in the novel? While the vision separates God from Gabriel in John's mind, and dismantles the myth of "safety" in the church, John's vision of God is actually in line with what Gabriel, and Gabriel's mother Rachel, say about God earlier in the novel. Under slavery, Rachel sees her role, as a believer, as one who

endures suffering until God provides deliverance from that suffering. God, according to Rachel, simply asks that African-Americans be patient, just as "He bid [the Israelites] wait but a little season till He should send deliverance" (64). This promise of deliverance is what sustains her through the demeaning, dehumanizing suffering of slavery: "in her tribulations, death, and parting, and the lash, she did not forget that deliverance was promised and would surely come. She had only to endure and trust in God" (65). Rachel sees God's hesitation in the delivery of slaves as representative of His mercy since "He struck no people down without first giving them many warnings" (65). In other words, God gives whites many chances to correct and atone for their sins before He punishes them. The emphasis, however, is on God's punishment rather than a punishment inflicted by the slaves themselves. The slaves, rather than strike out against the inhuman treatment by their masters, must wait passively for God's divine judgment. This reflects what Anthony Pinn sees as the inherent theodicy of African-American spirituals composed during slavery. Pinn suggests "the slaves were convinced that God had something good in store for them beyond slavery, and that they had only to wait on God, trust in God, and persevere" (Why Lord? 29). The African-American slaves based this belief on a connection they drew between themselves and the Israelites who were slaves in Egypt. As Pinn explains,

> the slaves naturally identified with the chosen people of God who encountered suffering at the hands of cruel task masters. This recognition of a similar existential condition extended to the assumption that God would work on behalf of African slaves as God had for the children of Israel. God is consistent in God's dealings with humanity; and therefore, God is forever concerned with the liberation of the oppressed. (Why Lord? 33)

Rachel's concept of God's relationship to African-American suffering, and the role of African-Americans is consistent with what Pinn argues was the dominant theodicy contained in spirituals.

Gabriel also promotes the notion that African-Americans should passively wait for God's divine punishment on whites, and chides those who said otherwise in one of his sermons: "There were those who cried—they had heard it, in their homes, and on the street corner, and from the very pulpit—that they should wait no longer, despised and rejected, spat on as they were, but should rise today and bring down the mighty, establishing the vengeance that God had claimed" (116). Gabriel says that this line of thinking "was not belief, this was unbelief" because it did not allow for God to accomplish His will in His own time (116). Instead, Gabriel extols the virtues of waiting since it is "better to wait, like Job, through all the days of our appointed time until our change comes than to rise up, unready, before God speaks. For if we wait humbly before Him, He will speak glad tidings to our souls; if we but wait our change will come" (117). This understanding of God is reflected in the hymns and theology of early Black Holiness churches. In his hymn "I Will Hide," Black Holiness leader C. P. Jones writes:

> From the malice of the wicked I will hide,
> From their tongues' deceitful slander, from their pride;
> From the evil that they do, From their worldly pomp and show—
> In Thy presence I will happily abide. (qtd in Spencer 117)

Jon Michael Spencer uses this hymn, as well as others, to show how "Jones' hymns teach Christians believers simply to endure until the end. Their vocation in life is not to make the world a better place, but to erect the barricade of faith to protect them from evil embodied in the world" (118). Gabriel's sermon reflects the theology contained in Jones's hymns.

The "glad tidings" Gabriel promises will come to those who wait for God's deliverance are similar to the joy and strength John gains which will help him to endure the suffering ahead, and the hope that Rachel clings to through her time as a slave. John's vision does not reveal anything dramatically new in terms of God's relationship to African-American suffering. Rather, it represents the same hope African-Americans have been clinging to for generations.

Baldwin's portrayal of God in the novel, reflected in theodicy of both Gabriel and Rachel, is much different than the "white God" Baldwin describes in The Fire Next Time, his autobiographical account of his own conversion experience. The "white God," according to Baldwin's description, used the Christian church to "sanctif[y] and rejoice" in the colonization and enslavement of African people (46). The "white God" also turns a blind eye to the suffering of African-Americans under the racist restrictions of a dominant white society. By contrast, the God of Go Tell It on the Mountain does not sanction, condone, or reward racist behavior. This God acknowledges the threats African-Americans face from the dominant white society, as well as the despair of the Black Holiness community. In response to this, God offers believers the joy and strength to endure both, as well as the promise of eternal reward and justice in the afterlife. In The Fire Next Time, African-American Christians are forced to submit to a racist authority which does not recognize their suffering, while in Go Tell It on the Mountain, African-Americans must simply endure racial injustice and wait for God's divine punishment to come, whether it be on earth or in heaven.

Although Baldwin does not criticize the Christian concept of God as harshly as he does in The Fire Next Time, he does raise some troubling questions that remain unanswered by the end of the novel. Before John has his conversion experience and vision, he wonders: "Why did his mother weep? Why did his father frown? If God's power is so great, why were their lives so

troubled?"(144). John's questioning is more potent when placed alongside the vivid depictions of suffering in the novel, suffering unbeknownst to John: Deborah is gang-raped by a group of white men and then the black community ostracizes her; Royal, Gabriel's first son, is murdered; Richard is falsely arrested, beaten, and driven to suicide. The impact of these events extends to Gabriel, Elizabeth and Florence, and finally to John. John's questioning is echoed by Baldwin's own questioning in The Fire Next Time: "God—and I felt this even then, so long ago, on that tremendous floor, unwillingly—is white. And if His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far? Why? In spite of all I said thereafter, I found no answer" (31). Neither does John find an answer in his vision. While John cries out to God to lift him up, out of the darkness where he has been cast down, God refuses, and instead insists John "go through" (205). While God offers enough joy and strength for African-Americans to endure their suffering, God does not alleviate their suffering, and the novel offers no explanation for God's reluctance to end their suffering. When placed alongside the vivid portrayals of suffering, and detailing how that suffering extends beyond the initial victims, the absence of an explanation leads to a troubling depiction of the Black Holiness theodicy inherited from slave religion.

Conclusion

In Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology, Anthony Pinn traces the evolution of Black theodicy from slave spirituals through the twentieth century. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, African-American theologians began exploring various explanations for God's lack of intervention in African-American suffering. For example, in his 1829 pamphlet Appeal, David Walker suggests "that slavery was allowed for pedagogical

reasons—due to the disobedience of Black people" (Pinn 42). While Walker did not suggest that racist behaviour of white Americans was justified, he does seem to suggest that slavery was God's corrective punishment. In the late nineteenth century Henry Turner also suggested that slavery had been pedagogical. Unlike Walker, Turner did not suggest that slavery was punitive, but rather that "without the sufferings of slavery, important lessons would have gone unlearned" (Pinn 55). In the early twentieth century Rev. Reverdy Ransom took this a step further and suggested that the lessons African-Americans learned through slavery help them play a special role in God's plan: "He asserted that African-Americans provided a sense of spirituality that was missing, a sense of spirituality that was vital for the further development of the United States and beyond... White Christians had forgotten the mandate of the gospel thereby relinquishing to African-Americans, who maintained a true sense of Christ's teachings, the fate of the United States" (Pinn 65). Pinn argues that these differences represent an evolution of Black Theodicy which was occurring in the Methodist circles, since all three men belonged to Methodist churches.

While Methodist thinkers continued to develop a more complex Theodicy, leaders and believers of the Black Holiness movement took a different position, very similar to that of African-Americans during slavery. They believed their role was to endure the suffering and passively wait for God's divine justice in the safety of religious communities. In Go Tell It on the Mountain, Baldwin dissects this idea into two parts and deals with the parts differently. On one hand, Baldwin describes a religious experience which dismantles the notion of safety in the Black Holiness community, and places the community, instead, on the same level as the streets in terms of suffering. The experience works as Louis Dupré describes in his theory, maintaining a traditional concept of the Christian God at the centre of the experience. On the other hand,

Baldwin goes beyond the Church/World dichotomy to examine this traditional concept of God in light of African-American suffering. The result is a two-tiered critique of the Black Holiness notions of theodicy: on one level, Baldwin clearly critiques the notion of safety and argues that this false promise need not exist, even within a traditional Christian framework, the framework Dupré works within; on another level, Baldwin begins to question whether a traditional Christian framework might satisfactorily address the problem of African-American suffering. Baldwin leaves the latter question unanswered in the novel, making John's conversion somewhat unsettling.

Chapter 2

"Let Him Bring You Low So He Can Raise You Up:" Ron Grimes, the Fictive Altar Ritual and Its Language

John is not the only character to have a religious experience at the altar in Go Tell It on the Mountain. During the same prayer service where John has his vision at the altar, Florence, Gabriel's sister, also makes a trip to the altar. While she has already converted to Christianity, her conversion was in a church where "one knelt before the altar once only, in the beginning, to ask forgiveness of sins; and this accomplished, one was baptized and became a Christian, to kneel no more thereafter… It was indecent, the practice of common niggers to cry aloud at the foot of the altar, tears streaming for all the world to see" (61). The church of her original conversion is consistent with the practice of African-American Baptist and Methodist churches at the time. Florence has reservations because she has been taught the act of kneeling at the altar is indecent, but she also does not want to kneel at the altar where Gabriel has preached because "she felt that if Gabriel was the Lord's anointed, she would rather die and endure Hell for all eternity than bow before His altar" (60). Despite this, she is drawn to the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized, where she kneels and cries. Sister Washington comes to pray for Florence and tells her: "Let Him bring you low so He can raise you up" (83). Sister Washington's advice effectively ties the act of kneeling at the altar to a larger theological concept: that in order to be empowered by God, one must first be humble and submissive.

Throughout the novel, Baldwin uses similar language to link submissiveness to God to the failed expectations and suffering of Black Holiness believers, suffering that includes racial injustice. The second section of the novel, "The Prayers of the Saints," tells the stories of three of John's relatives: his Aunt Florence, his step-father Gabriel, and his mother Elizabeth. Each

story is one of disappointment and unmet expectations. Baldwin uses phrases like "brought low" and "going down" to represent submissiveness to God, as well as the suffering that comes with that submissiveness. Meanwhile, Baldwin also uses phrases like "raised up" or "lifted up" when discussing the hopes and desires of the characters, hopes and desires they believe God will fulfill if they are submissive long enough. Of course, none of the characters receive what they want, leaving them to submit and suffer perpetually. The church promises that those who are faithfully submissive will receive rewards. Baldwin uses language that normally describes altar rituals to emphasize that this promise is false.

Although language normally used to describe altar rituals permeates the novel, few critics have addressed the ritual elements in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Hardy looks at several different aspects of conversion rituals and ecstatic experience in the Black Holiness tradition as Baldwin describes them. Hardy draws out connections to African religious traditions, the suppression of sexual desire and racist theology that argues African-American bodies are both ugly and sinful. Hardy suggests that the rituals in the Black Holiness tradition, especially those described in Go Tell It on the Mountain, are paradoxes, offering both positive and negative results for participants. He concludes that Baldwin is "determined to hold on to the religious rituals of his parents. They are not just an expression of false consciousness but they are also an expression of verve, passion, and vivacious black life" (34). Carol Henderson, meanwhile, focuses on the Ritual Space of the altar. She argues that "Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain provides an enriched arena for the black woman to thrust herself forward in an attempt to regain her voice and her identity… The altar provides the phenomenological venue for this discursive discourse to occur" ("Betwixt" 101). While both critics make important observations about the altar rituals, neither examines all the elements of the ritual, and no one to date has analyzed the

parallels between the language the novel uses to describe the rituals in the church and situations outside the church.

Ron Grimes' theories of Ritual Criticism and fictive ritual provide structure for an examination of the ritual elements in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Grimes, a pioneer of Ritual Studies, demonstrates an awareness of how the field is developing, and attempts to provide some of his own guidelines for this emerging approach to religion and religious elements of contemporary life. He offers a useful list of categories which critics can use to examine both sacred and secular rituals. Grimes also tries to bridge the study of live rituals and the study of ritual elements in fiction. Just as he provides a list of categories for examining rituals, he provides another list of categories for examining what he calls "fictive ritual" (Reading 127). Grimes' categories help illustrate how Baldwin uses the altar ritual and language that describes that ritual to examine the paradoxes within the Black Holiness church, both in the ritual itself and the broader theological ideals it suggests.

Grimes and Fictive Ritual

In Beginnings in Ritual Studies, Grimes offers some guidelines for both methodological and theoretical approaches to studying rituals. The first step, he argues, should be a description of the ritual itself:

> If we are to understand a rite adequately, the first prerequisite is as full a description as possible… we must work with full, evocative descriptions, not mere summaries of the values and beliefs implicit in them. Any description should make explicit whether its source is an exegesis produced by a participant,

> or a ritual manual that prescribes what ought to happen in a ritual enactment. (24-25)

In order to facilitate these kinds of descriptions, Grimes provides a list of questions which academics can use. He is careful to point out that "they are not magical nor sacred, and they demand constant modification as one asks them of a specific rite. If asking them of a rite does not sometimes force their reformulation, they are probably being misused" (25). He divides the long list of questions into six categories based on their subject: Ritual Space, Ritual Objects, Ritual Time, Ritual Sound and Language, Ritual Identity, and Ritual Action. It is only after a detailed description, he suggests, that one should venture into the task of interpreting the ritual. His discussion of theoretical approaches to interpreting the rituals is much briefer. The list of seven approaches, which he acknowledges overlap each other, includes "its underlying structures as a symbol system"; "its social functions"; "how it is related to individual and group psychology" …etc (30).

Grimes brings his understanding and approach of Ritual Criticism to fiction in Reading, Writing and Ritualizing. He acknowledges that there is a fundamental difference between observed ritual and what he calls "fictive ritual in fiction," but suggests that there are also similarities between the way both function: "Just as a ritually defined arena can serve to keep ordinary existence at bay by putting action, as it were, in quotation marks ('dying' ritually is not the same as dying in an auto accident), so fiction can bracket off ritual from the imperative to embody and enact, which rites normally entail" (131). What primarily interests Grimes is the way "fiction can either become a disease, a way of hiding and refusing responsibility, or it can substantially renew that from which it is tactically and momentarily disengaged" (131). In order to determine this, he maps out four different elements of focus, including "the expressive: the

ritualization of the writing process"; "the functional: the ritualization of readers' responses"; "the mimetic: ritual as depicted or alluded to in fiction"; "the formal: ritual-like features of fiction"; and "the archetypal: a readers perception of a character, action, or work as a repetition or variant of other characters, actions or work" (134). He also lists five factors which critics might look for in fiction, including "repetition," "inevitability," "stylization," "ludic" and "template" (140). Despite Grimes' organized lists of approaches and factors, the methods and theories here have boundaries that are just as fuzzy as theories about rituals in general; just as critics of rituals must co-create methods and theories with ritual studies theorists, so too must literary critics seeking to use Grimes' suggestions of reading ritual in fiction co-create methods and theories.

In this chapter, I combine Grimes' list of questions from Beginnings in Ritual Studies and his approaches (specifically the mimetic approach) and factors (especially the repetition and stylization factors) from Reading, Writing and Ritualizing to examine the connection between the altar rituals enacted in Go Tell It on the Mountain and the Black Theodicy critiqued in the novel. This analysis will be separated into two parts. First, I will provide an analysis of how Baldwin describes the ritual, paying close attention to the elements Grimes outlines in his long list of questions from Beginnings in Ritual Studies. In the second section I will look at how the language used to describe the rituals is also used to describe situations outside of the ritual sphere. The descriptive language is not the only element which connects these ritualistic and non-ritualistic spheres in the novel. They are also connected by a common theological principle: being submissive and passive leads to blessings from God. By connecting the two through descriptive language, Baldwin is able to set up a dialogical relationship between the two spheres. On one hand, the ritual, and its underlying theology that suggests God rewards those who submit, works well inside the church. It stimulates change and offers believers limited empowerment.

Characters, however, try to bring those underlying theological principles into their everyday lives with less successful results: characters become passive and disgruntled, submitting to racial injustice. The same principles which seem to stimulate change and empowerment inside the church lead to stagnation and perpetual disappointment outside the church

Inside the Church

When John goes up to the altar and kneels down to convert, his actions are not spontaneous or unprecedented. Instead, he follows a pattern of action which others have performed before him, actions Grimes labels "ritual action." He rises from his seat in the congregation, walks down the aisle to the altar (a space just in front of the platform and pulpit), kneels, and then rises up, converted from a "sinner" to a "saint." Each of these actions is a part of the ritual. As mentioned earlier, Florence provides an important precursor to John's performance of this ritual since she shares some of John's reservations. In the end, she "strangled her pride, rising to stand with them in the holy space before the altar ... [and] kneeled as she had not knelt for many years" (60). Similarly, when Elizabeth enters the church for the first time and converts, "she rose, while she heard them praising God, and walked down the long church aisle; down this aisle to this altar, before this golden cross" (191). Since many who enter the church may be unfamiliar with this ritual, they are verbally instructed by the preacher on how to perform it. Gabriel's instructions during his sermon, which he issues in the form of an invitation, are an example of this practice: "oh, would the sinner rise tonight, and walk the little aisle to his salvation, here to the mercy seat?" (102). In response to this invitation, "far in the back, a boy rose... and began to walk down the long, bright aisle. Someone cried: 'Oh, bless the Lord!' and tears filled Gabriel's eyes. The boy knelt, sobbing, at the mercy seat, and the church

began to sing" (102). Kneeling at the altar is a vital part of this ritual, and represents repentance and surrender to God. Those who refuse to kneel at the altar are, conversely, viewed as unrepentant and proud. Gabriel demonstrates this sentiment when Esther refuses a similar invitation he makes from the pulpit: "Now is the time to make yourself ready, now, amen, tonight, before His altar. Won't somebody come tonight?" (117-8). When Esther does not respond, Gabriel concludes that "she would never rise and walk that long aisle to the mercy seat. And this filled him for a moment with holy rage—that she stood, so brazen, in the congregation of the righteous and refused to bow her head" (118). In these passages, the "mercy seat" is synonymous with the altar at the front of the church.

The altar in the Temple of the Fire Baptized is the primary "ritual space" in the novel, and it is located within the larger ritual space of the church itself. What makes both the distinction of the altar and the church as sacred places ironic is the fact that neither space is sacred without the presence of God manifested by the worship of believers. This is especially true for John. For him, it is when the believers sing and shout that the church seems "to swell with the Power it held, and, like a planet rocking in space, the temple rocked with the Power of God" (8). Since it is the believers who manifest God's presence for John, it seems to him that "wherever they might be became the upper room, and the Holy Ghost were riding the air" (7), meaning that the space of the church, on its own, holds no special sacrality for John. In fact, when John is in the church alone, it is silent and dark like "the darkness of John's sin" (11). While he cleans, he notices that "in the air of the church hung, perpetually, the odour of dust and sweat; for, like the carpet in his mother's living-room, the dust of this church was invincible" (45). For John, there is little difference between the empty church and his home. Both hold the same odour and require the same kind of cleaning. Without expressly stating so, other critics

have acknowledged that the church, and by extension, the altar, are made sacred by the actions of believers, rather than the other way around. Henderson suggests that "urban decay and economic and educational scarcity make the temple of the fire baptized and its extended space—the threshing floor and the altar—communal sites of spiritual regeneration" ("Refiguring" 162). In other words, it is the fact that the church is one of the few places, if not the only place, where Black Holiness believers can assemble and find community that makes the church a place of "spiritual regeneration," and any other location where believers could meet and worship would provide a similar sacred space. Elsewhere, Henderson also argues

> On one level, the altar is the space that allows those who have sinned the opportunity for redemption and salvation. In this respect, the private becomes public as the sinner—through the auspices of prayer—submits to a being larger than the human self. This self, contextualized in the binaries of the carnal and the sacred, situates itself on bended knee before the congregant and pulpit, and is communally chastised for the offense to God and mankind. In this sweeping gesture, the sinner is pardoned by God and his/her spiritual peers. On another level, the altar also functions as the timeless site for contemplation and reflections on one's inner peace as the bruised and neglected seek impalpable recuperation for their spirits. ("Betwixt" 94)

Again, the emphasis is on the believers' actions. It is their actions which make the church, and the altar a "site for contemplation and reflection" or "redemption." If the believers were to perform this ritual in another space, that space would then inherit the same sacrality as the altar. The strongest evidence for this is, perhaps, Gabriel's conversion. He does not perform the same ritual as the others described in the novel. He is outside, underneath a tree. Yet, he feels the

presence of God and his conversion is no less or more valued than any other member. The sacredness of the church, and the altar, is therefore dependant on what believers do in those spaces, rather than on something inherent in the spaces themselves. Anywhere believers sing, worship and pray becomes a sacred space for the members of the Temple of the Fire Baptized. The storefront church where they meet simply provides a convenient location for them to gather and perform those rituals.

While the church and the altar are not inherently sacred, they are organized in a way that lends meaning to kneeling at the altar. When sinners come to the altar to kneel in Go Tell It on the Mountain, they kneel before two central "ritual objects" which re-enforce the meaning of their conversion: the pulpit and the cross. In fact, both objects represent the conflicting desires John and Florence have about kneeling at the altar. On one hand, there is the pulpit, which "dominated all… a wooden platform raised above the congregation, with a high stand in the center for the Bible, before which the preacher stood… The pulpit was holy. None could stand so high unless God's seal was on him" (49). The pulpit, then, becomes representative of the preacher, and since Gabriel is a preacher, "the Lord's anointed" (60), for both John and Florence, the pulpit also represents Gabriel's authority. Gabriel, himself, also feels the pulpit comes to represent his authority, remarking how when he stood behind it, in front of the congregation, "he looked out over their faces, their faces all upturned to him… they all looked up to him" (102). Not only does the pulpit give him respect and attention of the congregation when he stands behind it, but "the sinners who came crying to the altar after he had preached, bore witness to his calling" (94). As Powers explains, "because the body functions as a readable sign of a mysterious spiritual core, congregations use the body not only to display a hidden inner life that otherwise only God can see but also to reinforce the spiritual and social hierarchies of the

community" (788). Although Gabriel does come to believe that Debroah's devotion is more of a manifestation of this calling than sinners kneeling and converting (94), the act of kneeling before the altar is still a physical action which affirms his position of authority and superiority for him as well as John and Florence.

The cross, on the other hand, represents a deeper, spiritual authority, which both overturns and overwhelms the authority Gabriel presumes to have. When Florence finally kneels down at the altar, she fights against thoughts of Gabriel's authority and instead focuses on "going down before the scarlet cloth at the foot of the golden cross" (60). Likewise, when Gabriel instructs John to kneel down again, John focuses on "only the cross: he had turned again to kneel at the altar, and had faced the golden cross" (197). For both characters, the cross represents the more important meaning of conversion and kneeling before the altar. While they may seem to temporarily submit to Gabriel's authority, both characters view their actions as submission to God's authority in the hopes of gaining power to stand up against Gabriel. The cross, then, represents common power available to all members of the church. A description of the cross early in the novel strengthens the connection between it and the sense of commonly available empowerment. While John cleans the church, he "move[s] forward, hearing his feet crack against the sagging wood, to where the golden cross on the red field of the altar cloth glowed like a smothered fire, and switche[s] on one weak light" (44-5). For John, the cross is a weak light the church, especially Gabriel, smothers. If John is able to reach out to that light, to be saved and empowered by it, he believes it would enable him to transcend his step-father's authority. Shirley Allen pays close attention to the golden colour of the cross, linking it to "John of Patmos in his vision of the golden Jerusalem" ("Religious Symbolism" 183). She concludes that the cross "becomes a symbol for both the religious salvation and the adulthood that separate [the

saints] from him while suggesting the isolation felt both by a soul in the presence of God and by a youth who must throw off childish dependence" (184). Her argument, however, does not acknowledge the similarities between the experiences of John and Florence. Rather than "the religious salvation and the adulthood that separate them," the cross actually represents a source of divine power which both Florence and John believe will enable them stand against their enemies, including Gabriel.

In the Temple of the Fire Baptized, however, kneeling at the altar means more than simply genuflecting. Supplicants must stay kneeled until it is time for them to stand up. Clocks and watches cannot measure the "ritual time"; it is determined by whether the supplicant has heard from God. For some this might be a short time, for others a great deal of time. Early in the novel it is established that God, as well as the members of the church, has a flexible understanding of time. As the narrator sardonically explains, "[t]arry service officially began at eight, but it could begin any time, whenever the Lord moved one of the saints to enter the church, and pray. It was seldom, however, that anyone arrived before eight-thirty, the Spirit of the Lord being sufficiently tolerant to allow the saints time to do their Saturday-night shopping, clean their houses, and put their children to bed" (44). This establishes early on that neither God, nor the members of the church, have an absolute concept of the timing of spiritual events. This concept of God's timing is also evident during altar experiences. When Elizabeth prays, "she wondered if John were still on his knees, or had risen, with a child's impatience, and was staring around the church" (176). For Elizabeth, if John had not heard from God, had not been "broken" before he stood up from his knees, he would have risen too soon (176). She applies this principle to herself as well, because "she did not raise her head. She wished to tarry yet a little longer, that God might speak to her" (188). In other words, for Elizabeth, one must simply wait, kneeling at

the altar, until God speaks. It is only after this that one should rise up. This is exactly what Gabriel tells her before the two are married. Gabriel believes that God has preordained them to be a couple, and he tells Elizabeth: "fall on your knees and see if that ain't so—you fall down and ask Him to speak to you tonight" (190). The implication here is that kneeling down, submitting to both the cross and the pulpit, leads one to a deeper communion with God and empowerment that stems from that communion, if one waits long enough. At first, John does not wait long enough. He stands up and faces his step-father who menacingly instructs him to kneel back down. John complies because he does not feel he has had intimate contact with God which would empower him to stand against Gabriel. At this point, he still feels inf67yyerior and powerless.

Once God has interacted with the sinner, his or her "ritual identity" changes to "saint," someone who is saved and empowered. The character who most embodies this transition is Sister McCandles. At first, she resists what she understands to be the call of God, and "not until He laid her low, before this very altar, had she dared to rise and preach the gospel" (53). As a result, John sees her as holding a new identity and power: "her face was transfigured now, her whole being made new by the power of her salvation" (143). Gabriel echoes the change in power and identity after Elizabeth kneels to convert, since "when she rose, and as they walked once more through the streets, he had called her God's daughter, handmaiden to God's minister" (191). Elizabeth has achieved a new identity and position of importance, although it is limited importance. John fantasizes about access to this experience before he goes to the altar, an experience in which "he, John, who having lain in darkness would no longer be himself but some other man. He would have been changed, as they say, forever; sown in dishonor, raised in honor: he would have been born again" (144). John imagines that he would achieve a new

identity, and that with this identity would come respect and power. This empowerment, however, goes beyond a position within the established power structure that exists in the church already, a power structure which places Gabriel near the top. As Henderson suggests, sin "serves as the mechanism that brings 'the sinner' before the altar in an act of contrition that subverts the power dynamics of relationships between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, saints and sinners, and saved and unsaved—relationships that are constantly being produced and reproduced in cultural and familial contexts" ("Refiguring" 153). For Florence, her act of contrition gives her the power and courage to finally face Gabriel with the letter from Deborah which exposes his past, hidden failings. It also leads John to stand up to his step-father, to look him in the eye and proclaim: "I'm going to pray to God… to keep me, and make me strong… to stand… to stand against the enemy… and against everything and everybody… that would cut down my soul [all ellipses in original text except the first occurrence]" (211). In both of these cases, the empowerment the characters experience from kneeling and converting leads them to challenge the established power structure within the church, specifically the power Gabriel wields over them, the very power they were reluctant to submit to in the first place. Kneeling at the altar becomes paradoxical ritual of transformation. One must submit to God, and the church hierarchy even if it is corrupt, in order to gain the power to challenge the hierarchy; one must go down in order to be raised up.

Outside the Church

The language Baldwin and his characters use to describe kneeling at the altar also appears in other portions of the novel. Specifically, phrases like "going down", "being brought low", and being "lifted" or "raised" up appear in descriptions of both ritualistic and non-ritualistic

activities. In some way, this language relates to the repetition and stylization factors Grimes discusses in Reading, Writing and Ritualizing. Grimes' focus is overwhelmingly on plot, suggesting that critics pay attention to "the regularized recurrence of incidents in a plot structure; or the perception of recurrence" and how style elevates actions "to the status of gestures; they seem to mean more than they do" (140). However, both of these factors can be applied to language as well as action. In Go Tell It on the Mountain, Baldwin repeats and stylizes language as well as action. Analyzing the repetition and stylization of the language reveals how Baldwin and the characters in the novel transpose the theological principles at work in the altar ritual onto other aspects of Black Holiness life. Baldwin uses this transposition to dramatize the false hope of rising up after going down in a non-ritualistic sphere in contrast to the ritualistic sphere.

John's vision is perhaps one of the most obvious examples of this use of language. In his vision, he falls down into a darkness "like a rock, a dead man's body, a dying bird, fallen from an awful height; something that had no power of itself, anymore, to turn" (195). John knows he is going down, but questions "to what purpose, where? To the bottom of the sea, the bowels of the earth, to the heart of the fiery furnace? Into a dungeon deeper than Hell, into a madness louder than the grave? What trumpet would awaken him, what hand would lift him up?" (197). As I describe in Chapter One, the darkness John falls into features the moaning of African-American suffering. John wants to rise up out of the suffering, and calls on God to lift him out of it, but God instead tells John to "go through" (205). While John physically rises from the floor, he understands that he is unable to rise above the suffering of African-Americans. He must remain low, endure the suffering, until God determines it is the appropriate time for him, and other African-Americans, to rise. The parallels to the kneeling at the altar are clear. Just as one must kneel, submitting to both earthly and heavenly authority at the altar, so John learns in

his vision that he, and other Black Holiness believers, must submit to both God and the authority of those outside the church. They must remain bent low, enduring their suffering and humiliation until God determines it is time for them to rise, just as the supplicants must remain on their knees until God has spoken to them. They endure this suffering because God has promised them a life of joy, free from suffering, as a reward.

John's vision, however, is not the only place this parallel language appears. In fact it reoccurs throughout the novel, though it means different things to different characters. For most characters, "going down" or "being brought low" represents some kind of suffering. Florence's mother, Rachel, for example, "had often been brought low, but she had never been forsaken" (64). In this case, "brought low" refers to the suffering Rachel endures throughout slavery, and "never been forsaken" refers to the strength God provides her to be able to endure it. Likewise, For Elizabeth, being brought low means "that overnight, [she] had become an old woman and was half mad with fear and grief" (177-8). The loss of her lover and John's father, Richard, combined with John's birth precipitate her feeling brought low. Although the loss of Richard is clearly attributable to the racism of the white police force at the time, for Elizabeth these events result in "a bitterness that only the hand of God could have laid on her" (177). Whereas the subject who brings Rachel low is conspicuously absent, the subject is present in the case of Elizabeth. It is God who brings Elizabeth low, not white society. Elizabeth reaffirms this later when she meets Gabriel. She tells him: "look like I couldn't see my way nohow—I was all bowed down with shame… and sin" (189 ellipses in original). Elizabeth attributes her suffering here to her sin, thus making it a kind of punishment from God. For both Elizabeth and Rachel, their suffering is the will of God which they are forced to endure.

While both Elizabeth and Rachel use the language of altar rituals when discussing their own suffering, or the suffering of others, sympathetically, other characters use that language as a threat. Elizabeth's aunt, for example, warns her that if she continues to "walk around with [her] nose in the air, the Lord's going to let [her] fall right down to the bottom of the ground. *You* mark my words. You'll *see*" (156). Similarly, Gabriel warns that his sister Florence is "so proud the Lord going to bring her low one day. You mark my words" (95). In both cases, being brought low or allowed to fall is the result of pride. Thus, being brought low becomes a kind of punishment from God for the sin of pride. In some way, it also serves to elevate those issuing the warning, giving them the appearance of authority because they pronounce God's punishment. Gabriel has a similar warning for Esther, although this time it seems to be tempered with more compassion. He also elaborates on what "going down" means when he tells her: "I don't want to see you go down, girl, I don't want you to wake up one fine morning sorry for all the sin you done, old, and all by yourself, with nobody to respect you" (123). According to Gabriel, going down, God's punishment for Esther's sin, is humiliation and lonely suffering. This matches the parallel language in the stories of Florence and Rachel. The difference here is that both Gabriel and Elizabeth's aunt use it as a threat, which both warns of coming danger and re-enforces their power and authority over others. The message becomes one of inevitability. Baldwin captures this when Elizabeth worries about John: "There was a stiffness in him that would be hard to break, but that, nevertheless, would one day surely be broken... there was no escape for anyone" (176). African-Americans can either submit, or God will punish them until they are forcefully brought low.

Just as kneeling at the altar promises empowerment when one finally rises, so being brought low or going down in general brings with it the promise of being metaphorically raised

up. This promise is most evident in the lives of Gabriel and Elizabeth. Gabriel firmly believes that "one day God would raise him, Who had suffered him to fall so low" (136). Unlike many of the other characters, Gabriel's "fall" seems clearly related to his own actions. Gabriel falls by committing adultery with Esther, and then mistreating her and their son afterward. While these actions are connected to racial stereotypes, as I examine in Chapter Three, Gabriel seems unaware of this connection. He sees the guilt and shame he suffers as punishment, but he does not believe God has condemned him to suffer forever. A dream seems to offer him a promise of something more. In the dream, a voice calls Gabriel to climb higher and higher until he seems to reach Heaven. There, the voice presumably that of God, tells him that God's "seal" will be on Gabriel's "seed" (109). Gabriel comes to believe his redemption, therefore, will come through a son who will carry on his legacy as the Lord's anointed. Elizabeth's promise does not come from the same kind of supernatural experience, but instead from the assurances of those around her. Florence assures her: "The Lord, He ain't going to let you fall but so low" (184). Elizabeth does not, however, see any sort of salvation until she meets Gabriel. He tells her that "it was the hand of the Lord" that brings them together (190). For Gabriel, Elizabeth represents an opportunity to fulfill God's promise to him by having another son. Meanwhile, Gabriel makes Elizabeth "feel that she was not altogether cast down, that God might raise her again in honor... She, who had descended with such joy and pain, had begun her upward climb—upward, with her baby, on the steep, steep side of the mountain" (188). Elizabeth believes that Gabriel is her escape from the "fear and grief" she endures after Richard's death and John's birth (178). As Harris suggests, "Gabriel gives Elizabeth the hope that she can be safe from the wrath of God, just as he gives her the hope that he will provide earthly comfort and security for John and herself. The two levels of safety, both on earth and in heaven, draw her to him" (Black Women

21). Gabriel gives Elizabeth what Harris calls "the formula for completing her safety" (Black Women 21): "If you call on the Lord... He'll lift you up, He'll give you your heart's desire... you call on the Lord, you wait on the Lord, He'll answer. God's promises don't never fail" (188). In other words, for Elizabeth to escape her fear and guilt, she must simply submit to God and wait for God to raise her up.

The problem with following Gabriel's formula is that it never fully comes to fruition for either Gabriel or Elizabeth. Rather than an escape from guilt and fear, Gabriel provides Elizabeth only with different kinds of guilt and fear. Instead of being afraid of the world, and white men, she is "afraid of what God might say—of what displeasure, what condemnation, what prophesies of trials yet to be endured might issue from His mouth" (151). Elizabeth continues to feel guilt for her actions, and fears punishment from God. Rather than help her manage these feelings, Gabriel increases them by abusing her and blaming her for Roy's dangerous behaviour at the beginning of the novel. Gabriel, meanwhile, faces the possibility at the end of the novel that God's promise to him of an heir for his ministry may never come to fruition. He tries to hold on to the hope that Roy will become that heir, telling Florence that "the Lord's going to raise him up. I know—the Lord has promised—His word is true" but Florence responds by laughing and saying: "you going to weep for many a eternity before you see him crying in front of the altar like Johnny was crying tonight" (217). What Gabriel sees as his own failure, and God's potentially false promise, keeps him "bowed low, on his knees" at the altar when "he felt that he should rise and pray over Elisha" (111). Instead of being raised up, Gabriel remains stagnant, his ministry waning while he waits for God. The irony that his step-son John, rather than his legitimate seed, Roy, seems poised to take over his failing ministry angers Gabriel. He pronounces a vindictive warning over John that "it ain't all in the singing and the shouting—the

way of holiness is a hard way. He got the steep side of the mountain to climb" (214). While Gabriel's warning may come from spite, it offers an accurate description of the trials of others in the Black Holiness community, and represents a bleak outlook for John's future. While there may be joy and elation at the beginning, the life of a Black Holiness believer is filled with suffering and waiting for promises that never seem to be fulfilled. In the Black Holiness tradition, one is brought low, one way or another, and left there to suffer and cling to the unfulfilled promise of being raised up.

Conclusion

While discussing how both fictive and actual rituals straddle the lines between fact and fiction, Grimes quotes Barbara Myerhoff, a fellow ritual critic, to describe both the paradoxical nature of ritual and the participants' awareness of that paradox. Myerhoff states

> All rituals are paradoxical and dangerous enterprises, the traditional and the improvised, the sacred and secular. Paradoxical because rituals are conspicuously artificial and theatrical, yet designed to suggest the inevitability and absolute truth of their messages. Dangerous because, when we are not convinced by a ritual we may became aware of ourselves as having made them up, thence on to the paralyzing realization that we have made up all our truths; [that] our ceremonies, our most precious conceptions and convictions—all are mere invention, not inevitable understandings about the world at all but the results of mortals' imaginings. (Reading 131)

In a sense, what Baldwin does in Go Tell It on the Mountain is to expose the artificial and theatrical elements of altar rituals in the Black Holiness tradition. In his direct description of

these rituals, Baldwin presents a paradox, though not the one that Myerhoff describes. The paradox in the direct representation is that when a believer kneels at the altar, and waits for God to speak, that believer is given a new identity and infused with power and joy. One must go down in order to be raised up. However, Baldwin does not merely offer a direct representation of the rituals. Using similar language to describe non-ritualistic situations, Baldwin exposes the artifice of the theological truth implied in the ritual. The theological truth is that, just as at the altar one must go down to be raised up, so in life, one must endure suffering in order to enjoy blessings. Rather than affirm this "truth", Baldwin dismantles it, showing the unending suffering of various characters whose hope of blessings has dwindled into despair.

How, then, does Go Tell It on the Mountain fit into Grimes' dichotomy of fictive ritual? Grimes suggests "the relative disengagement provided by fiction can either become a disease, a way of hiding and refusing responsibility, or it can substantially renew that from which it is tactically and momentarily disengaged" (Reading 131). Grimes clearly favours the latter option, offering Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood as an example of how fiction can reinvigorate rituals, even very traditional ones like baptism (Reading 159). But where O'Connor tries to renew a ritual, Baldwin seems to deconstruct one. He tries to show that the underlying theological principle of the ritual is false and dangerous. This is the same theological principle that John's vision presents: endure suffering in the world until God intervenes. As John learns in his vision, God is not always willing or able to intervene, forcing believers to endure longer. By using the same language to describe altar rituals to also describe situations outside of the church, Baldwin shows that this principle is broader and more pervasive than simply John's vision. Many of the characters suffer in some way that is connected to racial injustice. Instead of rising up against that injustice, they come to see the suffering as a test from God, or even as a punishment. As a

result, they believe they must suffer until God decides that their suffering can end; the characters believe they are submitting to God, who will reward them, while in fact, they are submitting to a racist society, a submission that will yield no reward, only suffering. This does not mean that Baldwin is ignorant of the positive benefits of the altar ritual. For Baldwin, altar rituals represent an opportunity for empowerment inside the church, a chance for renewal of the church leadership. It means that corrupt leaders like Gabriel may not remain in positions of power forever. It also gives a voice to those who might not otherwise have a voice. While Baldwin acknowledges, even celebrates these aspects of the ritual in Go Tell It on the Mountain, those benefits do not outweigh what he sees as the negatives of the theological principle behind the ritual. For Baldwin, the imperative to remain passive in the world, and endure suffering with the false hope of reward at the end is too destructive to African-Americans.

Chapter 3

"The Lions of Lust and Longing:" William James, Conversions and Sexual Guilt

Near the middle of Go Tell It on the Mountain, Elizabeth expresses her doubt about the transformative effects of a religious conversion: "These niggers running around, talking about the Lord done changed their hearts—ain't nothing happened to them niggers. They got the same old black hearts they was born with" (182). Florence is thinking of Gabriel when she says this. On three occasions, Florence challenges Gabriel's assertion that he has changed, saying that he "was born a fool, and always done been a fool (38-9), that he "was born wild, and [he's] going to die wild" (44) and that "he ain't thought a minute about nobody in this world but himself" (84). It is not only Gabriel's treatment of his family which leads Florence to believe that he has not, and cannot change, but also the secret he keeps from his family and from members of the Temple of the Fire Baptized. While Gabriel claims to be sanctified and living a holy life, he has committed adultery, fathered an illegitimate son, and then abandoned the woman and his child. To Florence, he is the same man he was before his conversion experience: selfish, lustful, and oppressive, "no better than a murderer" (84).

Critics have generally agreed with Florence's judgment of Gabriel's conversion. Harris is perhaps most dismissive of his conversion, suggesting it is "fake" and that "Gabriel uses religion as a weapon to keep people feeling guilty and to maintain his superiority over them" (36). Likewise, Vivian May argues that Gabriel converts because "he wants to avoid, at any expense, feeling fragmented and the responsibility he would have to take for his actions" (100), which, much like Harris, implies that Gabriel's conversion is part of his manipulation of those around him rather than a product of a change of beliefs. Rolf Lundén also discounts Gabriel's conversion, emphasizing instead his hypocrisy: "in Gabriel Baldwin gives a picture of a man

who, because of pride and fear, abandons God, in spite of his rabid insistence to the contrary" (117). Hardy takes a more moderate approach, suggesting that "even though Gabriel's conversion initially does appear to shape his consciousness, his passions and commitment for the holy dissipate as quickly as they were once so intensely felt" (23). Some critics have been sympathetic to Gabriel's inability to change. Powers, for example, suggests that Gabriel does actually change in that, "as if to purify his past, he moves to the opposite extreme in his adulthood, denying and even condemning the body's desires... However, Gabriel's strenuous pursuit of sexual purity fails to extinguish desire" (198). Likewise, Robinson suggests that Gabriel believes "a 'saved' life calls for the erasure of a sexual identity" and that he "tries to live up to this ideal after his own conversion... [but] fails to escape his desires" (343-4). Even these more sympathetic portrayals, however, leave very little room for the possibility that Gabriel's conversion was genuine and sincere.

William James' theories on conversion experiences in The Varieties of Religious Experience offer a model by which to assess Gabriel's conversion. James claims to look at conversion stories in an objective, pragmatic manner, evaluating the benefits of conversions for the individual and community at large. He suggests that conversions provide an escape for individuals from despair, and that once this escape has been achieved, individuals are motivated to do positive things for themselves and the community. One hundred years after its publication, James' Varieties still engages critics. Three books, including an anthology, were published between 2000 and 2003, each trying to connect contemporary thought with James' theories (Bridgers, Proudfoot William James, Charles Taylor). While many critics who write on Varieties criticize James for his focus on individual, protestant conversion experiences, and for his protestant bias in the long terms effects of conversions, they praise him for his efforts to draw

the analysis of conversion away from the purely theological into the realm of practical philosophy. Furthermore, his Protestant bias makes the conversion model he describes an interesting contrast to the conversions in Go Tell It on the Mountain.

A close analysis of both John and Gabriel's conversions reveals that their experiences are very similar to the conversions James analyzes. Both characters gravitate toward a belief system that offers them an escape from their despair, and both experience a euphoric joy upon their escape. While the novel does not show the long-term effects of John's conversion, we are able to see the long-term effects of Gabriel's conversion. Instead of maintaining his joy, and performing acts that James deems helpful for the community, Gabriel slips back into despair and becomes selfish and destructive. While the nature of his and his step-son's despair are somewhat different, the similarity of their conversion experiences suggests that John's escape from despair, and possibly that of any Black Holiness believer, is short-lived.

James' Varieties of Conversion

To begin his discussion of conversion in The Varieties of Religious Experience, James establishes a dichotomy between the healthy-minded soul and the sick soul. The healthy-minded soul has a "constitutional incapacity for prolonged suffering and... a tendency to see things optimistically" (125). Sick souls, on the other hand, "cannot so swiftly throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil, but are congenitally fated to suffer from its presence" (135). This sense of evil can become exaggerated in the mind of sick souls, so much so that evil overshadows any good. The evil sick souls perceive is not necessarily evil that directly impacts them outwardly; it may simply be " the vanity of mortal things", "the sense of sin," or "the fear of the universe" (161). Sometimes this exaggerated perception can plunge a sick soul into "a

pathological melancholy" (145). James cites examples from the writings of Martin Luther, Leo Tolstoy and John Bunyan to illustrate this despair. All meaning of life fades away from these sick souls, and they are often left, like Tolstoy, asking: "What will be the outcome of all my life? Why should I live? Why should I do anything? Is there in life any purpose which the inevitable death which awaits me does not undo and destroy?... Without an answer to [these questions], it is impossible, as I experienced, for life to go on" (155). In some cases, James notes, this questioning causes sick souls to search for answers, which can lead to a way out of the despair. One way out of this despair is a conversion experience.

James bases his understanding of how conversions occur on two \concepts: fields of consciousness and centres of personal energy. James rejects the concept of a mind divided into conscious and unconscious states in favour of what he calls "fields of consciousness" (231). These fields are essentially arranged on a continuum: an individual is completely aware of what occurs in the fields on one end, and conversely unaware of what happens on the other end. An individual is more or less aware of what happens in the fields in between these two extremes depending on where the fields fall in the continuum. James refers to the fields of which an individual is less aware as " 'subconscious' or 'subliminal'" (207). As Lynn Bridgers suggests, "when the indeterminacy of these fields is combined with a model that allows simultaneously coexistent states of consciousness—some conscious and some beyond the margin of consciousness—we can move toward understanding James's view of conversion" (139). For James, each of these fields revolves around central ideas or interests. These ideas or interests move in and out of a position of importance depending on the circumstances. A particular group or system of ideas and aspirations tends to inhabit a place of importance in an individual more often than others. James labels this group or system as the "habitual centre of his personal

energy" (196). While other systems may move in and out of a position of importance, they often move around this habitual centre.

This habitual centre is not, however, static. It is constantly changing, assimilating new ideas and dispelling old ones. In some cases the entire system is bumped out of a position of central importance and replaced with another system that had previously been on the periphery. James explains that "if the change be a religious one, we call it a conversion, especially if it be by crisis or sudden… To say a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy" (196). The transformation of the habitual centre is generally a slow one that sometimes has what might be called growth spurts. In some cases, the transformation of the habitual centre to religious ideas may seem sudden and not at all gradual. James argues that this is because "the new centre of personal energy has been subconsciously incubated so long as to be ready to open into flower" (210). James explains that the convert is focused on the evil and getting away from it rather than constructing new moral and spiritual habits, but "his conscious strainings are letting loose subconscious allies behind the scenes, which in their way work towards rearrangement; and the rearrangement towards which all these deeper forces tend is pretty surely definite, and definitely different from what he consciously conceives and determines" (209). Individuals who experience these sudden conversion experiences "are in possession of a large region in which mental work can go on subliminally, and from which invasive experiences, abruptly upsetting the equilibrium of the primary consciousness, may come" (237). As a result, a new system of ideas seems to arrive from nowhere and present itself to the convert as a means of escaping the evil the convert had been

focused on. Those who experience these conversions often view it as a miracle: "Voices are often heard, lights seen, or visions witnessed" (228).

Bridgers sets James' understanding of psychology and sudden conversion in the context of contemporary research on dissociation. In her reading of James, what he describes as "the new centre of personal energy [that] has been subconsciously incubated" (210) is indicative of dissociation within the individual who experiences a sudden conversion. Both Bridgers and Ann Taves trace James' ideas on fields of consciousness and habitual centers to Pierre Janet and Frederic Myers, the latter of whom James actually cites. Both Janet and Myers allow for the possibility that an individual may have two or more independent consciousnesses working at the same time. Taves is careful to distinguish between Janet and James because "Janet… viewed all manifestations of a secondary self as symptomatic of hysteria and, thus, inherently pathological" while James and others "believed that secondary centers of consciousness could exist in healthy persons" (306). Bridgers goes further to examine how contemporary studies on dissociation relate to James' theories. She cites Allan Schore, a neurodevelopment researcher, who suggests that individuals who experience significant trauma, especially in early childhood, have an increased tendency for dissociation. She argues that this links "early adverse or traumatic experience to the sudden conversion" as James understands it (152). In others words, individuals who have experienced significant trauma have what James calls "a large region in which mental work can go on subliminally" (237) and are therefore more likely to experience a sudden conversion.

James lists four important, immediate effects of a conversion experience. The first "is the loss of all the worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the willingness to be, even though the outer conditions should remain the same" (248). This most

directly addresses the condition of the sick soul. Where before, the sick soul was obsessed with the evil in the world, and frustrated with this obsession, the convert is freed of this obsession despite the fact the evil has not been eradicated. The second effect "is the sense of perceiving truths not known before" (248). On this point James summarizes James Leuba to illustrate the difference between this sense where "the mysteries of life become lucid ...[but] the solution is more or less unutterable" and a sense of a solution to problems which is more intellectual and can be verbalized (248). During the conversion experience, converts feel they have a better awareness, but are not necessarily able to articulate that awareness. The third effect James explains is "the objective change which the world often appears to undergo" (248). Instead of the dreariness the sick soul had experienced, the world suddenly seems beautiful. According to James, "[t]his sense of clean beautiful newness within and without is one of the commonest entries in conversion records" (248). He cites the example of Jonathan Edwards' account of his own conversion in which Edwards describes "the appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory in almost everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers and trees; in the water and all nature" (248). The final element James mentions "is the ecstasy of happiness produced" by the conversion experience (254). James cites an example from the memoirs of evangelist Charles Finney, who says the experience was so euphoric he "bellowed the unutterable gushings of his heart" to the point that those around him asked if he was in pain. Finney responded: "No, but so happy I cannot live" (255-56).

While James acknowledges that in some cases this new set of religious ideas fades back into the periphery, and the convert returns to a state of despair, he argues that this is rare. Instead, he argues that most converts go on to achieve ideals they were previously unable to

achieve, "magnanimities once impossible are now easy; paltry conventionalities and mean incentives once tyrannical hold no sway" (267). James outlines the ideals which he argues mature converts gravitate toward, ideals of what he calls "saintliness" (259). These include a sense of an Ideal Power (which he labels as God), a friendly surrender to that power, and a sense of "elation and freedom" (272-3). These ideals manifest themselves in practical ways, including asceticism, a decrease in fear and anxiety, replaced with patience and fortitude, purity (which he defines as "the sensitiveness to spiritual discords... and the cleansing of existence from brutal and sensual elements"), and charity (273-4). James argues that these ideals and their manifestations not only benefit the individual, but also the community at large. Someone who exhibits the manifestations of saintliness (i.e. a saint)

> abounds in impulses to help. His help is inward as well as outward, for his sympathy reaches souls as well as bodies... Instead of placing happiness where common men place it, in comfort, he places it in a higher kind of inner excitement, which converts discomforts into sources of cheer... he turns his back upon no duty, however thankless; and when we are in need of assistance, we can count upon the saint lending a hand with more certainty than we can count upon any other person... his humble-mindedness and his ascetic tendencies save him from the petty personal pretensions which so obstruct our ordinary social intercourse, and his purity gives us in him a clean man for a companion. (370)

James argues that no one can survive in the contemporary world by solely living by these ideals since there are "bullies, robbers, and swindlers" who would take advantage of an "ideal" saint (375). Instead, the "successful," contemporary saint must take saintliness and "mix it with some worldly temper" without abandoning saintliness altogether (376). In fact, James goes so far as to

suggest that "the saintly group of qualities is indispensable to the world's welfare" (377). The closer everyone displays these qualities, argues James, the closer we will be to "the highest society conceivable" (375).

Not everyone agrees with James' understanding of what benefits the individual, and the community at large. The strongest criticism of Varieties among contemporary scholars focuses on James' blatant Protestant bias. While James claims to judge religious experience in pragmatic terms, by "philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness" (18), his criteria for what is helpful and reasonable reveals what Proudfoot describes as "an almost comical Protestant bias" ("Pragmatism" 41). Nowhere is this bias more evident than in what James sees as the long term benefits of conversion. Richard Rorty, for example, suggests that if James is arguing or suggesting that there is, indeed an "Ideal Power" or God (as he seems to do in several places) then "James betrays his own pragmatism" (95). James' claim to pragmatism can only be saved if we do not read James trying to prove the existence of an "Ideal Power," but Rorty admits "it is hard to construe the arguments [in the final chapters] in any other way" (95). Critics have not only challenged James on his affirmation of the existence of God, but also on the Protestant bias in the ideals he celebrates, along with the manifestations of those ideals. David Hollinger, for instance, suggests "Varieties is constructed to foreground certain religious sensibilities and not others, and to present the core of religion in general as having been most attractively manifest in exactly the cultural tradition to which James's listeners and readers were directly heir" (14). James' focus on Protestant Evangelical experience as the norm by which other experiences can be judged goes beyond simply the material he studies. As Hollinger argues, "James's ostensibly species-wide account of religious experience is deeply protestant in structures, tone, and implicit theology. Even the categories of religious experience around which Varieties is organized, and

the order in which James describes them, have this quality" (Hollinger 11). Hollinger argues that James's assertion that charity, asceticism (as long as it does not become obsessive), and "purity" are beneficial for individuals and the community at large is clearly Protestant, and perhaps even Puritan.

James's selection of subjects for his study has also drawn criticism from contemporary scholars. Wayne Proudfoot suggests that "the chief obstacle to an appreciation of Varieties today, a century after its publication, is likely to be James's lack of attention to historical context… He lifts them [sources he quotes] out of their contexts because he wants to construct a composite portrait of types of religious experience that he takes to be the same across different historical and cultural settings" ("Pragmatism" 43). Charles Taylor also argues that James's lack of historical context leads him to crucial errors, although he takes a more theological approach. James privileges private, individual religious experience outside of a communal environment as more valuable and authentic. Taylor argues that this not only betrays his Protestant bias, but is also based on a false dichotomy. Taylor suggests that the kind of "religious connection, the link between the believer and the divine (or whatever)" that James argues is exclusive to private, individual experience "may be essentially mediated by corporate, ecclesial life" (23). In other words, an individual may have an intense religious experience in private or in a communal context that represents the same kind of contact with the divine. Taylor goes on to suggest that, even in private, religious experiences are influenced by a larger community since "all experiences require some vocabulary, and these are inevitably in large part handed to us in the first place by our society, whatever transformations we may ring on them later. The ideas, the understanding with which we live our lives, shape directly what we could call religious experience; and these languages, these vocabularies, are never those simply of an individual"

(27-8). More so than most of the critics, however, Taylor attempts to salvage James' theories by applying them to religious experiences in a corporate setting, and acknowledging the influence of a community on individual experiences.

Given the strong criticism of James' theories, how can they be salvaged for this project? It would be difficult to view his theories as objective. At the same time, James' theories offer something different than the literature on conversions he analyzes. James tries his best to focus on the practical implications of conversion, rather than the purely theological ones. He does not, for example, speak of atonement, but rather of escaping despair. Neither does he discuss a holy life as mandated by God, but rather the ideals and manifestations that benefit society. The result is a pragmatic discussion of conversions based on an ideal, Protestant understanding of conversion. More relevant to this project is the fact that the practical effects James describes parallel the benefits that Black Holiness scholars describe. Scholars such as Sanders and Giggie suggest that conversion and subsequent sanctification empowers believers just as James argues conversion empowers saints to overcome their despair and find the strength to achieve saintly ideals. Black Holiness believers sought happiness and fulfillment in ecstatic experiences at the altar, providing them with something similar to "a higher kind of inner excitement" that James describes (370). A Holy lifestyle, which was simple, pure and dependable, was encouraged in the Black Holiness tradition, all qualities that James labels as saintly. Black Holiness communities also reportedly provided believers with a "safe," "loving" environment where they could connect with their past and with each other, the kind of environment that James might label as exuding charity. Most importantly, however, scholars suggest the Black Holiness tradition provided believers with an escape from the despair caused by racial and economic

oppression, replacing that despair with hope. For James, this escape from despair is crucial to a believer's development of saintly qualities.

James' theories, then, provide a way of measuring how well the Black Holiness community in the novel provides an escape from despair, and thus encourages saintly qualities. Although the initial impact of conversions works in almost exactly the way that James describes, the long term impact of Gabriel's conversion fails to achieve the ideals and manifestations that James lays out. Gabriel is unable to escape his despair, and rather than becoming the dependable, kind, charitable and pure saint that James describes, he becomes almost the opposite: fearful, oppressive, and driven by his own despair. This raises questions about the durability of John's conversion, as well as the ability of the Black Holiness tradition to address the despair of its members.

Conversions in Go Tell It on the Mountain

As I argue in Chapter One, John experiences despair due to a variety of factors. John finds himself trapped between the white world that he desires, but which will not accept him due to his race, and a religious tradition in which he feels he will constantly suffer, at first under his stepfather's tyrannical rule and later in the same way his stepfather suffers in the present. Part of this despair is the guilt he experiences in response to his blossoming homoerotic desire. John is aware of Black Holiness theology, having spent a great deal of time in the church; however, he is unable to accept it as his own until he has a vision while lying on the floor of the Temple of the Fire Baptized. This vision allows him to see an escape from his despair. God seems to give him the hope that one day he will be able to experience a life without suffering, likely in heaven, if he

endures his current suffering. The vision gives John a purpose and a direction which, at least temporarily, eradicates his guilt and despair.

The immediate results of his conversion are very similar to what James describes. John is no longer worried about his future, or where he belongs. When he gets up from the floor "he move[s] among the saints, he, John, who had come home, who was one of their company now" (209). No longer caught between the white world he desires and the Black Holiness world he fears, John firmly positions himself in the Black Holiness world. Furthermore, he no longer sees his stepfather as a threat, nor does he believe he will inevitably lead a life similar to Gabriel's life. Instead he sees himself as "free" and he believes "he had only to stand fast in his liberty" (221). Although John is still unable to understand what he sees in his mother's face, and struggles to find the words to describe what he has experienced when he talks to Elisha and his step-father, John still feels as though he has seen "wonders" (210) which have given him a different understanding of God, of salvation, and of his step-father. While the narrative description emphasizes how the street John walks down is the same as it always was, John sees it differently. The air is "new and heaven bright" (209), and "the avenue, like any landscape that has endured a storm, lay changed under Heaven, exhausted and clean, and new" (219-20). For John, this is no ordinary day, it is "the Lord's day" (220). All of this gives John a sense of ecstasy. He is "weeping, yet he [can] find no words to speak of his great gladness" (209); he is "filled with a joy, a joy unspeakable" (221). If John continues to follow James' formula, he will become a productive member of a religious community, forever freed from the despair he feels early in the novel.

Gabriel's conversion follows a pattern similar to John's, and the one that James outlines in Varieties. Gabriel suffers from despair, mostly caused by guilt about his sexual promiscuity.

Rather than revel in sexual pleasure, Gabriel "hated his sins—even as he ran toward sin, even as he sinned. He hated the evil that lived in his body, and he feared it, as he feared and hated the lions of lust and longing that prowled the defenseless city of his mind" (89). Gabriel's despair comes from guilt; however, he believes it comes from his sin, his sexual desire. For him, his despair is a direct result of his own lustful behavior. At some points, his despair brings him so low that "he longed, nearly, for death, which was all that could release him from the cruelty of his chains" (90). Gabriel admits "that [his guilt] was a gift bequeathed him by his mother" (89). Gabriel's mother prays that he will convert and forsake his life of "sin," and when Gabriel thinks about the pain he causes his mother by failing to convert he is filled with "confusion, and pain, and guilt" (70). Despite this, his mother never scolds him for his behavior. In fact, as Gabriel walks home one morning after his exploits, he "knew that when he entered [his house, his mother] would not ask him where he had been; she would not reproach him; and her eyes, even when she closed her lids to sleep, would follow him everywhere" (89). This silent judgment by his mother becomes "something that could not be borne" (89). As a result, silence becomes representative of guilt and judgment for Gabriel, the source of his despair, just as moaning becomes representative of John's despair. Not only this, but Gabriel projects his mother's silent judgment on God, so that on the morning of his conversion as he walks home, the relative silence becomes an indication of God's judgment of him, and a sign of his guilt: "There was silence, only silence, everywhere—the very birds had ceased to sing, and no dogs barked, and no rooster crowed for the day. And he felt this silence was God's judgment; that all creation had been stilled before the just and awful wrath of God, and waited now to see the sinner—he was the sinner—cut down and banished from the presence of the Lord" (92). Just as John feels trapped between a white world which will not accept him, and the life of a Black Holiness believer which

seems to hold only suffering, Gabriel feels caught between the unsatisfying life of sexual promiscuity, and the "holy" life of a Black Holiness believer: "He could not say yes to his mother, and to the Lord; and he could not say no" (72). He feels condemned to live in judgmental silence, awaiting his final punishment.

Gabriel is able to convert once the silence he perceives seems to be miraculously broken. While sitting under a tree the morning after another sexual adventure, he hears the voice of his mother singing, "which filled all the silent air, which swelled until it filled all the waiting air" (93). The breakthrough leads Gabriel to convert, and the immediate effects are similar to the ones that James describes. Gabriel is suddenly free of his despair as "the heart within him [was] broken, and yet began to rise, lifted of its burden" of guilt (93). He perceives what he believes to be God's mercy in rescuing from his personal "Egypt" of chaos and despair and setting him "on the solid rock" of Black Holiness theology (93). The experience brings Gabriel a sense of ecstasy, as "his throat unlocked; and his tears came down as though the listening skies had opened" (93). Most importantly, however, the outside world seems to undergo a dramatic change. It is no longer silent. Instead "there was singing everywhere; the birds and the crickets and the frogs rejoiced, the distant dogs leaping and sobbing, circled in their narrow yards, and roosters cried from every high fence that here was a new beginning, a blood washed day!" (93). Gabriel believes that he has not only been freed of his guilt and despair, but also from the lust that tormented him.

At first, Gabriel's life as a "saint" reflects his understanding of his conversion, as well as what James outlines as the long term effects of conversion. While Gabriel is not completely free of all fear, it is not a debilitating fear that drives him to despair. For example, when Gabriel gets up to preach at the revival meetings "the heart within him [is] great with fear and trembling, and

with power" (99). Gabriel believes the power comes from God, and it enables him to overcome his anxiety about preaching to such a large crowd. Although Gabriel seems to have little to sacrifice in terms of luxuries, making it difficult to assess his level of asceticism, he does show disdain for the other ministers because they "had indeed grown fat, and their dress was rich and various" and compares them to "highly paid circus-performers" (103). He also challenges them for making fun of Deborah, and feels that they are "ashamed and confounded before his purity" (105). In fact, his interaction with Deborah becomes the strongest indication of the life he now wants. Deborah exhibits James' four practical attributes of saintliness more than Gabriel does in the novel. Her appearance is ascetic: "no ornaments ever graced her body; there was about her no tinkling, no shining, and no softness. No ribbon falsified her blamelessness and implacable headgear" (94). Deborah also has a calm throughout the novel that is almost never disrupted. She demonstrates charity in keeping Gabriel's mother company during her last days, and later in helping Gabriel with household chores. Most importantly, however, she is the epitome of sexual purity for Gabriel, despite the jokes others make about the gang rape she endured in her youth. Gabriel emphasizes the difference between her and the women he slept with during his youth: "She was not to be seen prancing lewdly through the streets, eyes sleepy and mouth half open with lust, or to be found mewing under midnight fences, uncovered, uncovering some black boy's hanging curse! No, their married bed would be holy, and their children would continue the line of the faithful, a royal line" (105). Deborah becomes the antithesis to the women that evoked his lust. Powers suggests that by "marrying Deborah, a woman whom he does not find desirable," Gabriel tries to remove all objects of sexual desire from his life, and thus eliminate his own desire (198). Similarly, Csapó suggests that Gabriel marries Deborah "with the hope of controlling the sexual desires of the flesh" ("Defiance" 323). What neither critic acknowledges

is that this denial is not simply adherence to Black Holiness doctrine. Gabriel associates his youthful lust with his pre-conversion despair. In order to avoid the despair, he believes he must avoid his lust. As a reward for this, he believes God will bless him with a son who would continue his legacy.

Gabriel's attempt to avoid his lust fails when he meets Esther. At first Gabriel tries to interpret his lust for Esther as religious compassion, but this attempt crumbles in the kitchen of their employers, and they have sex on the floor "locked away from all others, all heavenly or human help" (124). Though the affair only lasts nine days, it leaves Gabriel "bruised and frightened.... what frightened him was the knowledge that, once having fallen, nothing would be easier to fall again" (125). He begins to see women in the same way he used to, and instead of forsaking his lust entirely, he tries "to wear out his visions in the marriage bed, [struggling] to awaken Deborah, for whom his daily hatred grew" (125). Rather than admire Deborah for her sexual purity as he did before Esther, he begins to hate her both because she cannot satisfy him and because she is able to maintain her purity when he cannot. When Esther tells him she is pregnant, he plunges back into "despair" (129), and as he talks with Esther, there is "only silence in him, like the grave" (131). This silence extends beyond his conversation with Esther into his relationship with Deborah as she becomes "more silent than ever in the weeks that followed" (133). Although Deborah does not seem to judge Gabriel in the same way his mother did, he feels the same kind of guilt as a result of Debroah's silence. The guilt even manifests itself in the town, where the faces of "people he had known all his life... seemed suddenly to mock him, to stand in judgment on him; he saw guilt in everybody's eyes" (134). This guilt plagues Gabriel, even after he briefly thinks he has escaped it when he meets Elizabeth. Elizabeth does provide him with Roy, the son he wants, but Roy has no interest in following his father's footsteps as a

minister. Roy's lack of enthusiasm, coupled with the thought that perhaps Roy is being punished for Gabriel's sins, haunts Gabriel (111). But it is not only Roy's lack of interest that reminds Gabriel of his guilt. When John first gets up from the floor and stares at his step-father,

> John's staring eyes tonight reminded Gabriel of other eyes: of his mother's eyes when she beat him, of Florence's eyes when she mocked him, of Deborah's eyes when she prayed for him, of Esther's eyes and Royal's eyes, and Elizabeth's eyes tonight before Roy cursed him, and of Roy's eyes when Roy said : "You black bastard." And John did not drop his eyes, but seemed to want to stare forever into the bottom of Gabriel's soul. (150)

Gabriel begins to feel his guilt constantly, and feels judgment from the silent stares of everyone around him.

As Gabriel's despair returns, he loses any of the practical benefits that James outlines in Varieties. While Gabriel once found the strength to overcome his fear, his fear and sense of guilt begin to debilitate him. Early on he begins to lose the passion for preaching as "in every church he entered, his sin had gone before him... There was peace nowhere, and healing nowhere, and forgetfulness nowhere" (134). Eventually, he cannot even bring himself to rise and pray with Elisha because "each cry that came from the fallen Elisha tore through him. He heard the cry of his dead son and his living son" (111). His harsh, oppressive treatment of his family also represents his loss of charity and purity (as James defines it). He projects his own faults on to others, condemning Elizabeth for her extramarital sexual activity and John for his inherited uncleanness. He tries to beat them into submitting to the rules he has been unable to follow himself, and in some way, also tries to beat away the judgment he sees in their eyes. It is no coincidence that the people he tries to keep feeling guilty are also the ones whose silent stares

provoke his own guilt. His harsh treatment of his family is his attempt to crush their judgment, and in turn, his own guilt. Gabriel does not consider that the religious ideas he has converted to are not sufficient to eradicate his despair. Instead, he retreats further into those ideas since they have offered the only reprieve from his despair thus far. As a result, Gabriel loses any benefits he might have gained from conversion, damning himself to silent despair.

The Implications of Gabriel's Failure

What implications does Gabriel's failure have for John's conversion, and more importantly, conversions in general? While critics have tried to separate Gabriel and John, suggesting that Gabriel's motives and sincerity for converting are not as legitimate as John's, a close analysis of both conversions reveal remarkable similarities. Both grapple with overwhelming despair and guilt, yet feel they cannot commit to the Black Holiness lifestyle until they undergo a seemingly supernatural experience. This follows what William James describes as a legitimate conversion. Both characters look to a new set of core beliefs to help them escape their despair. There are of course differences between the nature of guilt and despair each character experiences, but the principle difference is that the novel shows what happens to Gabriel in the long run, but does not show what happens to John. Initially, Gabriel's conversion is successful, and he exhibits signs of what James calls "saintliness," signs that are promoted and celebrated in a Black Holiness community. These qualities dissipate once despair overtakes Gabriel again. Stanley Macebuh describes Gabriel's failure as a failure of love, and argues it "is a failure in the case of a specific individual, and not one that is attributable to the objective impossibility of [love]" (60). This leaves the possibility open that John, and other Black Holiness converts, might be able to live a life free of despair after conversion to the Black

Holiness tradition. However, if we measure success by the capacity of the individuals to escape despair then the text seems to suggest otherwise. The source of Gabriel and John's despair is linked primarily to sexual desire, but also to racism, and the text seems to show that the Black Holiness tradition is ill equipped to deal with either.

The Black Holiness solution to despair caused by sexual guilt is to eradicate sexual desire altogether. The promise of this occurs through "sanctification," an experience following conversion which purifies "the believer of inward sin, giving him 'perfect love' toward God and man" (Paris 16). This is what Elisha explains to John at the beginning of the novel: "When the Lord saves you He burns out all that old Adam, He gives you a new mind and a heart, and then you don't find no pleasure in the world, you get all your joy in walking and talking with Jesus every day" (49). This creates what Patrick Johnson describes as "an unhealthy and unrealistic view of sexuality and the body in general" (399). Johnson goes on to say "[t]he black body is theologized as a 'temple of the Lord,' as a vessel that should be kept pure and 'clean.' However, when church members try to put this doctrine into practice, both in and outside the context of the church, their guilt about their carnal thoughts reinforces the false dichotomy between the spirit and the flesh" (402). Rather than address the guilt that believers might experience because of their sexual desire, the Black Holiness tradition actually reinforces it. Sanctification does not, in fact, eradicate desire, as the case of Gabriel illustrates. There are important differences between Gabriel's desire and John's desire. While Gabriel's desire is mature and heterosexual, John's is still developing and homosexual. These differences, however, make John less likely to escape his despair than Gabriel. As Johnson suggests, "heterosexual church members who 'yield to the flesh' are rarely, if ever, asked to leave the church" (402). The same is not true for queer members: "African-American gay men are rarely if ever out of the closet. Such a blatant

expression of one's sexuality would be an affront to the fundamentalist conventions of the church, even though this attitude embodies a double standard in terms of who can and cannot express sexual agency within the black church" (404). This double standard puts more pressure on John to control his desires and keep them hidden, and that pressure will more likely lead to increased guilt, and ultimately, despair.

The sexual guilt and despair both John and Gabriel experience is also intertwined with racism. Michael Dyson traces the sexual guilt of African-American males in the church to slavery, when "black men were believed to have big sexual desire and even bigger organs to realize their lust. White men became obsessed with containing the sexual threat posed by black men" (313). African Americans chose one of two extreme options: "some blacks sought to fulfill the myth of unquenchable black lust… [while others] rigidly disciplined their sexual urges to erase stereotypes of excessive black sexuality" (313). While black churches helped to elevate the view of black bodies to the temple of God, "there emerged almost immediately in black churches a conservative theology of sexuality. In part, this theology reflected the traditional teachings of white Christianity" (313). In black churches, however, this repressive theology became "exaggerated… to rebut the myth of black sexuality being out of control" (313).

The conditions of both Gabriel and John's sexual guilt are, therefore, based in part on racist fears and stereotypes, even though neither character recognizes it. At first, Gabriel follows the stereotype of unbridled black sexuality, all the while suffering guilt that has been passed down by the church via his mother. After his conversion, he attempts to restrain his sexuality, in part to avoid the despair he feels before his conversion. While Gabriel links this despair to his sexual "sin," it is also related to what Horace Porter describes as "his embattled black manhood [which] has been so ruthlessly socialized" ("The South" 61). This socialization, which forces

Gabriel to be aware of how the white world will react to his actions, is also directly related to his despair which follows him after his conversion. As Powers suggests, he suppresses his "desire to lash out violently against those who force him to contain even the movements of his own body [which] is directly related to the power he can exercise among the relatively powerless as a minister in the church" (801). Where Gabriel had previously felt disempowered as an African-American man in the South, he feels a certain amount of power as a preacher in the Black Holiness community. Despite this, "Gabriel's sense of racial threat exacerbates his frantic need to hold what little social power he has been able to hoard" (800). In order to maintain this power, Gabriel must not only restrain his violent urges against his white oppressors, he must also restrain his sexuality. In failing to accomplish this, Gabriel not only risks losing any power he gains socially, but effectively loses any moral power he gains as well. Powers draws a connection between John and Gabriel, while acknowledging an important difference: "The problem of John's sexuality, like his stepfather's, is entangled with the question of race. Unlike Gabriel, John responds to his desire not with rigid self-containment or the will to domination but through a fantasy of flight into whiteness" (803). While Gabriel wants to gain power over those who oppress him, John secretly wants to be one of them. In the white world, he imagines he will be able to indulge in all kinds of pleasures, possibly even his homoerotic desire. Even in these fantasies, however, John is plagued by the guilt passed down to him by the church. The Black Holiness church reinforces John's sexual guilt, just as it does Garbiel's guilt, guilt rooted in racist stereotypes and enhanced by racial injustice.

Conclusion

Powers says that an early draft of Go Tell It on the Mountain ends with an "open revelation of John's homosexuality" (806). John makes a "public confession of faith that is also a confession of same-sex desire" (806). In this version, John does not aspire to sanctification which would eradicate his sexual desire, and as a result, he does not damn himself to a reoccurrence of the despair he is trying to escape. John finds a way to incorporate his new found Christianity with his sexual desire, a radical departure from the Black Holiness tradition into a new, hybrid kind of religion which combines the things he longs for from the white world and the spiritual strength of the church. This, however, is not the version of the novel that was published. In the published version, there is no indication that John will be able to overcome the pitfalls that Gabriel falls into. Gabriel, like John, tries to eradicate his sexual desire which he believes is the direct cause of his despair. He believes that his conversion and subsequent sanctification enable him to accomplish this. When he succumbs to his desire with Esther, however, his belief is shaken, and his guilt returns along with his despair. Gabriel's failure is not an isolated incident, but rather an illustration of the Black Holiness tradition's ineffective solution to the despair caused by sexual guilt rooted in racism. Gabriel's story, then, becomes a dark and ominous foreshadowing of John's future, a future of vain struggle against sexual desire.

Conclusion

Religious experiences are central to Go Tell It on the Mountain. They motivate the characters, and show the degree to which and the fictional world the characters live in is a theological world. The way the novel presents these experiences offers critique of this theological world, and theory on religious experience provides a method for determining the nature of that critique. Louis Dupré's theory of religious experience, for example, presents a valuable framework for analyzing the character of God in the novel, and He relates to John and, by association, African-Americans in general. Dupré argues that God designs each experience to interact with a particular individual's circumstances in order to communicate a message to that individual. While his theory is theological in nature, it allows for the experiences to be broken down into in a way that is useful. Dupré provides a way of decoding the message of John's vision. Distinguishing the vision's content from John's circumstances, and then analyzing how those two components interact, reveals a clear message: endure suffering for a reward in heaven. This contradicts the promise of safety offered by the Black Holiness church, since suffering will exist within the church just as it exists outside the church. The implications of the message, however, go further than illuminating a false promise by the church. While God offers African-Americans the joy and stamina to endure their suffering as a result of racial injustice, God is either incapable or unwilling to alleviate that suffering. Dupré's theory, then, helps to reveal how Baldwin uses John's vision to suggest that the Black Holiness tradition, and perhaps Christianity in general, inadequately addresses racial suffering in the United States.

Ron Grimes' theory of fictive rituals is less a theory of what religious experiences mean, and more a methodology of what to look for when studying ritual in fiction. Grimes provides lists of approaches, elements, and questions critics can use to examine fictive ritual. Primarily a

Ritual Studies scholar, Grimes' emphasis on ritual as a vital part of religious experience provides a unique focus for analyzing Go Tell It on the Mountain. When studying fictive ritual, attention turns to the actions of the characters, and how the text describes this action. In Baldwin's novel, the primary ritual is going to the altar, and the text emphasizes kneeling down and then later rising up. In the context of the church, these actions represent a chance for empowerment and renewal. In submitting to God, individuals find power and authority when they rise up. Believers, however, apply this principle of how God works to life beyond the church. The characters use the same language to describe the altar ritual as they use outside the church to describe a broader theological principle: God will raise up individuals who have been brought low and submit. This broader principle encourages African-Americans to passively endure their suffering and wait for God to intervene. The text, as a result, is torn between the empowering impact of these rituals inside the church and the in debilitating impact outside the church.

Arguably one of the first academic scholars of religious experience, William James, published The Varieties of Religious Experience in 1903. In that book he attempts to outline how conversion experiences occur, and why they benefit individuals and society as a whole. His theories, however, focus on individuals and have a decidedly Protestant slant. While critics like Charles Tayor and Lynn Bridgers try to incorporate James' ideas into contemporary scientific and philosophical theories, neither is able to overcome James' Protestant bias. Rather than hinder my analysis of Go Tell It on the Mountain, James' Protestant bias aides my interpretation. Without relying on theological language, James articulates what individuals expect to happen when they convert to an evangelical tradition. The practical, tangible outcomes James outlines provide a valuable contrast to the conversions in Go Tell It on the Mountain. The underlying outcome that James identifies, the one upon which all the others are based, is that the new

converts are able to escape the despair which plagues them. In Go Tell It on the Mountain characters only escape their despair for a short time, primarily because the external circumstances which prompted their despair in the first place do not change. As a result, characters do not enjoy the other outcomes that James outlines in his theories. Again, the text uses conversions to raise significant questions about the Black Holiness tradition's ability to address the despair and suffering of African-Americans.

These theories help to bring the novel's critique into focus. Baldwin is not challenging the characters' belief in God or in the divine origins of religious experiences. Black Holiness believers in the novel are very similar to the believers that critics like Cheryl Sanders and John Giggie describe. The characters cling to a way of worshiping that maintains their connection to life before slavery, a way of worshiping that seems to give a physical, sensual reality to God, a way of worship that is not subdued in order to appear more respectable to the rest of American society. In fact, believers actively place themselves in opposition to the rest of American society. Both Gabriel and John see the richer, white Americans who live on the other side of town as "in the world, and of the world, and their feet laid hold on Hell" (30). In reaction to this, Black Holiness believers adhere to a strict moral code which prohibits indulgence in food, drink and sex. In this opposition, they find a community which potentially offers support to its members in a variety of ways. Those believers who feel silenced or ignored in the broader world can find a voice and limited empowerment. Believers who suffer racial injustice are promised an end to suffering if they only wait for God's divine deliverance. Those who suffer from despair due to racially motivated guilt are offered the chance to escape that guilt. If the Black Holiness tradition is able to provide the benefits it promises, it becomes a loving community, a shelter for

African-Americans weathering the storm of racial injustice, a strengthening and empowering organization which will lead them to the promised land of freedom and equality.

Of course, in the novel, the Black Holiness tradition is unable to fulfill its promises. Characters who convert find a momentary escape from their despair, a temporary joy which briefly sustains them; they find power and courage to endure their suffering. Unfortunately it is all short lived. The power characters find in the church does not carry over to their lives outside the church. Racial inequality still causes suffering. Sermons and rituals reinforce the idea that patience is virtuous, particularly when it involves waiting for God's intervention. They learn that passively enduring suffering is rewarded. While characters cling to the promise of rewards and deliverance, their joy fades as God fails to intervene. Unable to adhere to the strict moral codes, particularly as they relate to sexual desire, the characters suffer guilt, and come to believe that God's inactivity might be related to their own failures. As a result, their despair returns and deepens. They fail to recognize that the source of their suffering is American society, and instead, come to see their suffering as partly a result of their own "sin." Characters are therefore condemned to live in a perpetual state of suffering, despair, and guilt.

The results of the Black Holiness tradition's failed promises also arise in Baldwin's play The Amen Corner. In the introduction, he explains why the protagonist, Sister Margaret, has committed herself to such a damaging tradition:

> She is in the church because her society has left her no other place to go. Her sense of reality is dictated by society's assumption, which also becomes her own, of her inferiority. Her need for human affirmation, and also for vengeance, expresses itself in her merciless piety; and her love, which is real but which is

> also at the mercy of her genuine and absolutely justifiable terror, turns her into a tyrannical matriarch. In all of this, of course, she loses her old self. (xvi)

Baldwin here argues that the church is not solely responsible for the damaging effects of the passive, restrictive theology. Complicit in the continuing suffering, despair, and guilt of Black Holiness believers is an American society which offers them little other option. This is certainly true in Go Tell It on the Mountain. John envies the white world "where he could eat good food, and wear fine clothes, and go to the movies as often as he wished... [where] John, who his father said was ugly... became immediately beautiful" (12). At the same time, John realizes "this world was not for him. If he refused to believe, and wanted to break his neck trying, then he could try until the sun refused to shine; they would never let him enter" (31). John's only other alternative seems to be the world of the streets. This is hardly a world of hope. It is the world of embarrassing Sunday morning drunks and violent rapes. Royal and Richard, two characters who try to embrace this world, end up lynched or driven to suicide. Faced with these options, choosing a life of suffering, despair and guilt seems to be a choice of survival. John believes that it is "God's injustice that he must make so cruel a choice" (35), but the novel places the blame squarely on the shoulders of American society.

"...How Did I Make It Over"

As I mention earlier, the more I studied Baldwin's novel, the more I saw the differences between my experiences and John's experiences. Any despair I may have felt during my most fervent religious experiences of speaking in tongues and being slain in the spirit can probably be attributed to teenage angst, something much less debilitating and permanent than the racial injustice permeating the whole of American society during the 1930s. Furthermore, I have found my way out of the church, not as a result of its inability to address my sense of suffering, but because I could no longer believe in its theological tenets. Despite leaving the church, I have many friends and family who still actively participate in various Pentecostal congregations. Some struggle with economic difficulties, some with physical or psychological disabilities, some with personal and emotional traumas. I often hear these people say things like "I am just waiting and trusting on God to do His will because I know all things work together for good for those who love the Lord." I comfort myself with the thought that perhaps the tangible charismatic religious experiences they have in church, combined with the theology they reinforce, give them some comfort, some hope which allows them to endure and get through their difficulties. Go Tell It on the Mountain, however, gives weight to nagging questions in the back of my mind: Is it only despair and suffering borne of racial injustice which charismatic churches are ill-equipped to address, or is it all suffering? Is it possible that my family's beliefs and practices actually prolong and increase their despair, rather than providing and escape from it? Is my father, who recently became a pastor of a Pentecostal church in rural Nova Scotia, leading his congregation deeper into a world of false hope and security, a world of perpetually deferred deliverance? I do not know how to answer these kinds of questions. Although I am unable to fully embrace these

experiences, there is something inside me which keeps me from rejecting religious experiences in the charismatic church as entirely harmful.

As late as The Fire Next Time, one of his most critical works on the church, Baldwin is also unable to completely dismiss the religious experiences of the charismatic church. Although he critiques the church for basing its rituals and practices on the principles of "Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror" (31), there is a longing for the church, for that charismatic feeling, that comes through in his writing. One passage, in particular, communicates this longing:

> The church was very exciting. It took me a long time to disengage from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will. There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord. I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, as Leadbelly and so many others have testified, to "rock." 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 knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, "the Word"--when the church and I were one. Their pain and their joy were mine, and mine were theirs--they surrendered their pain and joy to me, I surrendered mine to them--and their cries of "Amen!" and "Hallelujah!" and "Yes, Lord!" and "Praise His name!" and "Preach it, brother!"

> sustained and shipped my solos until we all became equal, wringing wet, singing and dancing, in anguish and rejoicing, at the foot of the altar. (33-4)

This same longing is present throughout Go Tell It on the Mountain. Although there are significant differences between my circumstances and those of John's, even those of Baldwin himself, I can identify with this feeling of longing. It is a feeling that keeps me from dismissing charismatic religious experiences altogether and continues to motivate my academic work.

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