Baldwin and the black religious experience in the urban ghetto

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the lives of black people. The essay passages expose the author's personal point of view about the influence of religion in black lives and further clarifies the protest against religious practices depicted in his fiction.

While chapter one will serve as the focal point of the paper, it will also serve as background material for the remaining chapters. For example, chapter two will concentrate on Baldwin's religious experiences as recorded in his essays, with the use of appropriate excerpts from his short stories to reinforce his experiences and resulting convictions. Nobody Knows My Name, Notes of a Native Son, The Fire Next Time, and Going to Meet the Man will be the sources for chapter two. How the author's attitude is disseminated in some character portraits will be conspicuous.

Chapter three will provide an analysis of irreligious Baldwinian characters in Another Country and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. The analysis is intended to emphasize the author's own persuasion toward agnosticism, as each character's religious position is studied.

The last chapter of the paper will contain a summary of the preceding chapters. Hopefully the paper will fulfill the original purpose of studying Baldwin's preoccupation with the fatal effect of the black religious experience in his essays and fiction. This topic was chosen for discussion because a close reading of the author's works revealed how important to him the influence of religion in black lives seems to be. Further investigation revealed Baldwin's depressed attitude about the black urban church, its services and its members. Since the author's religious concern is so prevalent in his works, the decision was made to
examine Baldwin and the Black Religious Experience in the Urban Ghetto in this paper.

Without Dr. Richard K. Barksdale's patience and guidance, I never would have completed this paper. The generosity in time and effort Geraldine Ellis, Pat Peters, and B. J. Freeman rendered me will never escape my memory. My husband's understanding and indefatigable willingness to assist me in any way he could brought me great comfort, during the ordeal of thinking, crying, reading, crying, writing, and crying. Because my mother and my son encouraged me to finish this task with words and gestures, I love them all the more.

James Baldwin will never know what a laborious endeavor it was to amass these four chapters around one aspect of his works. But my mother, Mrs. Geneva C. Phelps, my son, Steven, and my husband, J. P. Sherwood, know; this is why I dedicate this thesis to them.
The total effect of Christianity on the masses of ghetto blacks plays a major role in James Baldwin's fiction and essays. The effect of the religion has been debilitating and confusing to poor city blacks according to Baldwin's portrayal of the experience in his writings. He creates characters which fall into three overlapping categories: (1) the church hypocrite, (2) the unsophisticated true believer, and (3) the wayward sinner or non-believer. The first group is generally depicted as the most dehumanized group to which one could belong; the second is often ridiculed for lacking the ability to reason in choosing Christianity as an escape route from life rather than seeing it as one of imprisonment; the third group is the most celebrated in Baldwin's works and one would expect it to be the happiest of the lot, for it assails black followers of Christianity. However, the author's atheists are not allowed happiness or hope. In many instances they suffer greater anguish than either his hypocrites or his ignorant saints. Confused John of the first novel, before he faces "The Threshing Floor," Rufus the enraged atheist of the second, and cosmopolitan Leo of the third novel undergo great mental agony due to their religious confusion.

Yet added to Baldwin's portraits of religiously confused or religiously brainwashed black men are his personal refusal to accept
Christian principles as stepping stones toward a better life for blacks, because of how the religion was implanted in the minds of people throughout history, and his implication that the religion is only useful for blacks as a means of escape or revenge.

As a tool of revenge, Christianity causes blacks to become con­nivers and deceivers like those in group one. As a way out of a daily miserable existence, Christianity offers its followers emotional release and a yearning for a better life after death—a fantasy entertaining the idea that earthly suffering brings heavenly reward. The life of ease whites seem to enjoy here on earth will be granted to blacks in Heaven; and upon this dream the second group depends. By denouncing the religion through this manner of characterization, Baldwin allows his non-believers of the third group to become tormented heroes in his fiction and he allows his own agnostic attitude to be paramount in his essays. Therefore, as far as the author is concerned, to embrace the faith is debilitating whether the religion is used for revenge or escape, and to reject it is confusing because no solution to life's disappointments—fantastic or otherwise—is presented as absolutely viable. Those who reject the faith angrily continue to probe themselves for an answer as to why it has such a hold on others.

Of the blacks who hold to Christianity, the reasons for which are either deceitful or ignorant, Baldwin says:

Their faith may be described as childlike but the end it serves is often sinister. It may indeed, 'keep them happy'... but also, and much more significantly, religion operates here as a complete and exquisite fantasy revenge: white people own the earth and commit all manner of abomination and injustice on it; the bad will
be punished and the good rewarded, for God is not sleep-
ing, the judgement is not far off. ¹

Then the hypocrite and the true saint outwardly worship God for release
from daily pressures while secretly hoping that they will be delivered
from their tormentors by God in the judgement. In the last day they
will be deservedly crowned and gowned to live happily in "Glory" for-
ever. Further along in the same passage quoted above, Baldwin states
that the black preacher is largely responsible for indoctrinating his
followers with the fantasy revenge idea.²

Gabriel is one of Baldwin's best hypocrites and is portrayed as
John's southern evangelist stepfather, in Baldwin's first novel, who in
his later life becomes the deacon—caretaker of a storefront church in
Harlem. His commentary on whites reinforces the author's idea of fan-
tasy revenge among blacks, as the following statement will disclose:

His father Gabriel said that all white people were
wicked, and that God was going to bring them low. He
said that white people were never to be trusted, and that
they told nothing but lies, and that not one of them had
ever loved a nigger. He, John, was a nigger, and he
would find out, as soon as he got a little older, how
evil white people could be.³

Gabriel could say such things and feel justified by doing so because as
one of the downtrodden saints, he, like most of his congregation,
cherishes the thought of overcoming white domination while he is sing-
ing praises and shouting hallelujah to God during worship services.

¹James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, Bantam Books (3rd ed.;

²Ibid., pp. 54-55.

³James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, Dell Books (New
While Gabriel, as will be explained later, is not always portrayed as the devout man of God he so fanatically strives to be, superficially Baldwin's description below includes him as one of the author's saints falling in the second category of characters:

The more devout Negro considers that he is a Jew, in bondage to a hard taskmaster and waiting for a Moses to lead him out of Egypt. The hymns, the texts, and the most favored legends of the devout Negro are all Old Testament and therefore Jewish in origin: the flight from Egypt, the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, the terrible jubilee songs of deliverance: Lord, wasn't that hard trials, great tribulations, I'm bound to leave this land! 4

Such is the foundation upon which Gabriel builds his faith in Christian religion and upon which he prepares all his sermons.

Returning to the role of the black preacher in the ghetto black man's concept of Christianity, it is obvious from the following passage that his influence upon church members was considerable in persuading them to identify with Jews:

To begin with, though the traditional Christian accusation that the Jews killed Christ is neither questioned nor doubted, the term "Jew" actually operates in this initial context to include all infidels of white skin who have failed to accept the Savior. No real distinction is made: the preacher begins by accusing the Jews of having refused the light and proceeds from there to a catalog of their subsequent sins and the sufferings visited on them by a wrathful God. Though the notion of the suffering is based on the image of the wandering, exiled Jew, the context changes imperceptibly, to become a fairly obvious remainder of the trials of the Negro, while the sins recounted are the sins of the American republic.

At this point, the Negro identifies himself almost wholly with the Jew. 5

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4 Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 55.
5 Ibid.
So ingrained in this idea in Gabriel Grimes, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, that it becomes an obsession with him as time passes, and he is ready to attack whites for their wickedness with the greatest of subjectivity and prejudice.

Even in raising his children, Gabriel tries to instill in them his contempt for whites. Gabriel says to John, after his youngest son, Roy, along with his gang, had started a fight with a white gang in another part of town—a fact which Gabriel dismisses entirely from his mind—and after seeing Roy had been cut over his eye in the fight, "You come here, boy," he said, "and see what them white folks done done to your brother." Deacon Grimes has already concluded that Roy was never at fault and was attacked without provocation. He continues his railing by saying, "You see? ... It was white folks, some of them white folks you like so much that tried to cut your brother's throat." To show Gabriel's ignorance in making such an accusation, Baldwin reveals John's thoughts and his mother's about his stepfather's vent of anger:

John thought, with immediate anger and with a curious contempt for his father's inexactness, that only a blind man, however white, could possibly have been aiming at Roy's throat; and his mother said with a calm insistence: "and he was trying to cut theirs. Him and them bad boys."

But Gabriel is further inflamed by his wife's remarks and by those coming from his sister, Florence, who endeavors to make her brother aware of his

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6 *Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 45.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., pp. 45-46.
biased attitude in the matter.

He lashes out with vilification, "You can tell that foolish son of yours something, . . . You can tell him to take this like a warning from the Lord. This is what white folks does to niggers, I been telling you, now you see." A man embittered by the kind of life he has to lead in this country develops a distorted view of his oppressors—a view which the Old Testament story intensifies in him—and he indeed longs for vengeance against his white enemies. This is Gabriel Grimes.

Adequately, Baldwin sums up the basis for the fantasy revenge idea that Gabriel and Negroes like him are so devoted to:

But if the Negro has bought his salvation with pain and the New Testament is used to prove, as it were, the validity of the transformation, it is the Old Testament which is clung to and most frequently preached from, which provides the emotional fire and anatomizes the path of bondage; and which promises vengeance and assures the chosen of their place in Zion. The favorite text of my father, among the most earnest of ministers, was not 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,' but 'How can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

The favorite song of Baldwin's father is also Gabriel's cry to the Lord, as he struggles so often in the novel to replace the evil in himself with sanctimony.

If then the fantasy revenge idea engulfs the lives of ghetto blacks who follow Christianity, both the first and second groups of characters mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper (1) recognized hypocrites and (2) the devout saints can be combined into a larger divi-

9 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, pp. 45-46.
10 Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 56.
sion of individuals who seek vindication through the religion to which they adhere. Group one, into which Gabriel falls, seeks revenge, while group two, as will now be disclosed, searches for escape.

In this second sub-division, such characters as Sister McCandless, Praying Mother Washington, Florence, who is Gabriel's sister, Elizabeth, the wife of Gabriel, Elisha, Sister Price, and Father James (all delineated in Go Tell It on the Mountain) can be placed. Perhaps the more fully portrayed characters in this group are Florence and Elizabeth. The two are caught up in the religion due to different circumstances, but their purpose is one in the same and that is to escape life. Both harbor uncertainty and misery. Both are unhappy with the lives they have led. By the same token, both have no other path of refuge to turn to at last except the path of religion.

Florence is depicted as a black girl reared in a strictly matriarchal and religious atmosphere. While living in the South with her mother and brother, Gabriel, she is portrayed as a dissatisfied girl nursing a tremendous longing to escape her miserable home life and environment to which the hatred she feels for her brother is inexorably tied. It is always her dream to leave the South and find happiness in the North especially after Gabriel is born. His birth reduces her chances for success in the world to second place because as a boy Gabriel's fulfillment takes precedence over that of his sister's. Accordingly, Florence's mother raises her to help care for Gabriel and manage the house, believing that her daughter's only aspirations should go no farther than those of motherhood and a wife's responsibility to her husband.
Although she grows up in a religious atmosphere, there is nothing to indicate that Florence actually believes as her mother wants her to believe in the religion to which she is daily exposed. In the main story and upon kneeling at the altar to pray to God, Florence is described as feeling indignation about praying aloud:

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. She had never done it, not even as a girl down home in the church they had gone to in those days. Florence is afraid to expose the suffering inside her because she is unaccustomed to and deplores the practice. But at this particular moment, she is especially aware that her brother is gloating over her sudden loss of pride and her overture to find peace in the Lord:

She knew that Gabriel rejoiced, not that her humility might lead her to grace, but only that some private anguish had brought her low: her song revealed that she was suffering, and this her brother was glad to see. What leads Florence to the altar is fear. Baldwin unearths the inward feelings of this sixty year old woman in the following passage:

"Neither love nor humility had led her to the altar, but only fear. And God did not hear the prayers of the fearful, for the hearts of the fearful held no belief. Such prayers could rise no higher than the lips that uttered them." Again while remembering the biblical stories of miracles she had been taught in her childhood and her life as it has been, Florence whispers, "Lord, help my unbelief." 

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11 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 67.
12 Ibid., p. 65.
13 Ibid., p. 66.
14 Ibid., p. 67.
lieve because she has largely experienced a life of failure, regret, and hatred.

She fails to produce a worthwhile marriage with her husband, Frank. In the first place, Florence ignores Frank's gestures toward being a loving husband because her eyes are focused on rising above the "common nigger" level. He drinks too much, overspends his earnings, carouses with the boys at home and away from home; therefore, for Florence, Frank is just another common nigger who she has come all the way from the South to find and marry. Her conversation with Frank below shows how Florence looks at her husband and their marriage.

"You think I want to stay around here the rest of my life with these dirty niggers you all the time bring home?"

[Frank] "Where you expect us to live, honey, where we ain't going to be with niggers?"

"I just don't like all that ragtag . . . looks like you think so much of . . . ."

"And what kind of man you think you married?"

"I thought I married a man with some get up and go to him, who didn't just want to stay on the bottom all his life!"

"And what you want one to do Florence? You want me to turn white?"

"You ain't got to be white to have some self-respect! You reckon I slave in this house like I do so you and them common niggers can sit here every afternoon throwing ashes all over the floor?"

The respectable life Florence is searching for she apparently cannot find with Frank, and she becomes exasperated.

In her reflections, Florence's regret about her marriage is hinged upon the ceaseless hope that one day Frank would change and become the practical, upstanding, respectable Negro she wants him to

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15Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 86.
be. This he never becomes. But in his own way Frank is proud and loving. He buys her things--impractical objects for the apartment, food in odd quantities, and hats of any description. Yet, he illustrates his pride, particularly after she resorts to shouting, in her final comment in quote fifteen, when his wife pounces on him about entertaining his friends in their living room where ashes are dropped everywhere:

"And whose common now? What you reckon my friend is sitting there a-thinking? I declare, I wouldn't be surprised none if he wasn't a-thinking: 'Poor Frank, he sure found him a common wife.' Anyway, he ain't putting his ashes on the floor--he putting them in the ashtray, just like he knew what a ashtray was ... But we's a-going now, so you can sweep up the parlor and sit there, if you want to, til the judgement day."

Thus while Florence regrets that Frank has not given her the material security and comfort she once hoped to have, she is sorrowful even more because she made no gesture toward reaching out to him on his own terms. Only when he leaves her forever (at her own volition) and dies during the war in France, does she realize how much he had really kept her from feeling complete abandonment. When he goes on a drinking binge, he always returns to her apologetically for sympathy, and Florence enjoys his submission. She, like her mother, is matriarchal.

Florence never stops hating the brother for whom she had to make sacrifices when she was a child--a brother who hides his brutal and lecherous nature behind a disguise of holiness. After Gabriel is baptized when he is twelve, Florence remembers screaming years later, as she watches Gabriel coming home one night nauseous from intoxication,

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16 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 86.
"I hate him! I hate him! Big, black, prancing tomcat of a nigger!"17 Her hate worsens when she learns of Gabriel's adulterous affair with Esther and of the illegitimate baby conceived as a result. Florence says to her husband's remark that Gabriel was a preacher, and therefore should have been above reproach, "Being a preacher ain't never stopped a nigger from doing his dirt."18 Her brother's attempt to be something he really is not is what disturbs Florence more than anything else. Gabriel feels throughout the novel that his first wife, Deborah, and his family are oblivious of his affair with Esther until Deborah admits to him her knowledge of the secret before she dies. Also Florence keeps a letter from Deborah over the years which discloses that she learned of Gabriel's secret affair. With this letter, Florence expects to destroy her brother one day by exposing his clandestine affair and the lewd past life he tries so hard to bury behind an air of piety.

Another thing that has brought Florence to the altar is her illness and the fear of death. During her illness, she turned to doctors and healers for the cure which none could give her. In her misery, Florence often dreams of her mother, Gabriel, Frank, Gabriel's first wife (Deborah), and even death itself appearing before her to haunt her for not kneeling to God in prayer and asking His forgiveness for all the wrongs she has done against her family:

And after death's first silent vigil her life came to her bedside to curse her with many voices. Her mother . . . stood over her to curse the daughter who had denied her on her death bed. Gabriel came . . .

17 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 75.
18 Ibid., p. 88.
to curse the sister who had held him to scorn and mockery of his ministry. Deborah... looked on with veiled, triumphant eyes, cursing the Florence who had mocked her in her pain and barreness. Frank came... with that same smile, the same tilt of his head. Of all of them she would have begged forgiveness, had they come with ears to hear. But they came like many trumpets; even if they had come to hear and not to testify it was not they who could forgive her, but only God.19

Florence comes to the altar filled with fear, regret, failure, and hatred in an effort to escape it all by finally submitting herself to the God she never revered before.

On the other hand, Elizabeth is not as impenetrable as Florence. Her pride is of another kind. She is not cold and unfeeling like Florence, for in her early life she loved her father dearly because he spoiled her; she wraps herself up in her teenage lover, Richard, while growing up, because he showered her with affection; then, after Richard's death and John's illegitimate birth, she ventures to find solace in marrying Gabriel because he seems to be strong enough to bear her infirmities and his. Elizabeth's pride is based on a resentment—a contempt—she holds for anyone who tries to thwart her chances for happiness. As a result, she surrounds herself with an aura of haughtiness toward her aunt, who takes her away from her father, toward Sister Williams, her New York landlady who makes Elizabeth feel uncomfortable while she engages in her intimate affair with Richard, and toward any outsiders who seem to threaten John's (her son and Richard's) opportunity to have a better life than her own. Elizabeth does not want John to know life as she has known it.

19Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 68.
Always conscious of her mother's and aunt's desire that her life would be one of Christian devotion, Elizabeth seldom thinks seriously about this until she meets Gabriel. When she is with her father, as a young girl, Elizabeth cares not that he manages a bawdy house and that her aunt sees him as a man of sin. Baldwin states that even if her father is, in so many words, the epitome of evil, "... she would not have regretted being his daughter, or having asked for anything better than to suffer at his side in Hell." To her aunt's tongue-lashings about being a conceited child, she thinks, "I sure don't care what God don't like, or you, either ..." Once she gives her love to someone, Elizabeth gives her complete self and reserves none for anyone else. So there was no room in her heart for both her father and God.

After falling in love with Richard, Elizabeth puts her destiny entirely in his hands. And she thinks about this while at the altar:

Not even tonight ... could she wish that she had not known him; or deny that, so long as he was there, the rejoicing of Heaven could have meant nothing to her--that being forced to choose between Richard and God, she could only, even with weeping, have turned away from God.

Again Elizabeth divorces herself and her happiness from God judging from the statement above. She does not seem to need Him as long as Richard is there to make the world go away. In another passage, the same idea is re-stated. Elizabeth and Richard leave the South to continue their romance and begin new lives for themselves in the North. Elizabeth's

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20 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 155.
21 Ibid., p. 156.
22 Ibid., p. 157.
devotion to Richard is unshakeable:

In those days, had the Lord Himself descended from Heaven with trumpets telling her to turn back, she could scarcely have heard Him, and could certainly not have heeded. She lived ... in a fiery storm, of which Richard was the center and the heart.23

Elizabeth is proud of her relationship in that she can close out everything else because of it. Any uncertainty or suffering she encounters can be escaped when she is near Richard. He is her refuge and not God.

But her little world of joy is shattered when Richard commits suicide (after being unable to bear the inhuman abuse and refusal of whites to look upon blacks as real people) when he is released from prison on false charges of assaulting and robbing a white storekeeper. The opportune time never comes for Elizabeth to tell Richard about her pregnancy. Unfortunately, his death interrupts her plans as to how she would reveal her secret to him.

Richard's death and her pregnancy wear down much of Elizabeth's pride because at the time she has no one to lean on or look to for safety. She bears the burden alone, and it is then that she begins to think God is punishing her for rejecting Him. He takes her man away and leaves her to be ostracized by society for conceiving a child out of wedlock. Thus she fears the God she once never worried about.

The haughtiness of spirit which both Elizabeth and Florence possess makes it easy for them to become the best of friends. It is through Florence that Elizabeth meets Gabriel, who Florence disdainfully makes known to her new found friend. She tells Elizabeth, "He

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23 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 161.
some kind of preacher... I ain't never heard him. When I was home he weren't doing nothing but chasing after women and lying in ditches, drunk.24 Then in answer to Elizabeth's question about the Lord changing a person's heart, Florence manancingly quips, "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."25 The bitterness with which Florence views life makes Elizabeth feel that she will endure great hardship for the rest of her life, that is, until she meets and comes to know Gabriel Grimes.

When she does come to know Gabriel, Elizabeth responds to Florence in the same manner in which she responded to those outside the world of she and her father and of she and Richard. She ignores Florence's barbs against her brother because, "... Gabriel had become her strength."26 As she begins to look to Gabriel more for comfort, Elizabeth thinks, "... now, she would embrace again the faith she had abandoned, and walk again in the light from which, with Richard, she had so far fled... She told herself that it was foolish and sinful to look backward when her safety lay before her, like a hiding-place hewn in the side of a mountain."27 As mentioned before, Elizabeth's constant quest is for refuge from the world. She tells Gabriel,

25Ibid.
26Ibid., p. 186.
27Ibid., p. 187.
"Til you come . . . I didn't never hardly go to church at all, Reverend. Look like I couldn't see my way nohow--I was bowed down with shame . . . and sin." And because she bears the pain of losing Richard and the torture of John's birth all alone, Elizabeth thinks that the bond between her and Gabriel marks the end of the suffering God has cast upon her.

Yet Baldwin describes her condition even as Elizabeth consents to be Gabriel's wife, so that ultimately it is apparent her suffering has not reached its end: "And she wept, in her great joy that the hand of God had changed her life, had lifted her up and set her on the solid rock, alone." After marrying Gabriel and giving him a son and daughter of his own, Elizabeth is witness to and a victim of her pious husband's selfishness, hatred, and brutality. In the excerpt below, Elizabeth thinks hard about how Gabriel has misled her to believe he would love John as his own:

She had believed him when he said that God had sent him to her for a sign. He had said that he would cherish her until the grave, and that he would love her nameless son as though he were his own flesh. And he had kept the letter of his promise: he had fed him and clothed him and taught him the Bible—but the spirit was not there. And he cherished--if he cherished her--only because she was the mother of his son, Roy. All of this she had through the painful years divined. He certainly did not know she knew it, and she wondered if he knew it himself. She cannot determine just how she misinterpreted the kind of person

28 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 187.
29 Ibid., p. 188.
30 Ibid., p. 175.
Gabriel really was during the days of her courtship and early years of marriage with him:

She had told him that John was nameless; and she had tried to tell him something of her suffering, too. In those days he had seemed to understand, and he had not stood in judgement on her. When had he so greatly changed? Or was it that he had not changed, but that her eyes had been opened through the pain he had caused her?  

So Elizabeth is kneeling at the same altar with Florence—both of them seeking escape from their unhappy lives. Both have tried to close themselves off from reality with the aid of deep self-pride, but now they call on the name of the Lord, to whose will neither wants to submit but out of futility both have to yield.

If Florence and Elizabeth are more vividly painted than the minor characters grouped with them in sub-division two of Baldwin's saints, then their counterparts do not bring to the foreground that private part of their lives which Florence and Elizabeth are allowed to expose. Sister McCandless and the others named with her are portrayed as staunch believers just passing through this world on their way to a better and more glorious place in Heaven. They too seek escape from life in worship and in longing for the infinitely undisturbed life of joy in Heaven.

Previously it was stated that groups one and two in Baldwin's larger category of saints basically seek a revenge against their white oppressors through their religion—group one being more graphic in its plea for vengence than group two. And to group one, the character, Gabriel, certainly can be placed. Earlier in the paper, Gabriel's

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31 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 187.
position is identified by his own comments on the black-white relationship and God. Along with Gabriel, his mother can be added to group one (and for this reason alone) because she too believes in the future destruction of the white race by the will of God. Otherwise her place is with group two. Baldwin reveals her thoughts:

... she did not forget that deliverance was promised and would surely come. She had only to endure and trust in God. She knew that the big house, the house of pride where the white folks lived, would come down: it was written in the word of God ... God would cause them to rush down ... into the sea. For all that they were so beautiful, and took their ease, she knew them, and she pitied them, who would have no covering in the great day of His wrath.32

The belief in the vengeful God of the Old Testament is identifiable in the intimate meditation of Gabriel's mother's mind, in lieu of the above excerpt. She may be accepted as a devout believer but also as one who firmly believes in God's vengeance just as Praying Mother Washington, Sister McCandless and Father James do. Even Elizabeth at one time in her life, when she is so involved with Richard, inwardly expels a desire for heavenly retribution against white men. Full of hatred for them, after policemen have unjustifiably mistreated him in jail, her feelings are described by Baldwin in this manner:

... for the first time in her life, she hated it all—the white city, the white world. She could not, that day, think of one decent white person in the whole world ... she hoped that one day God, with tortures inconceivable, would grind them utterly into humility, and make them know that black boys and black girls, whom they treated with such condescension, such disdain, and such good humor, had hearts like human beings, too, more human hearts than theirs.33

32 Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 70.

Like Gabriel, at this particular moment in her life, Elizabeth is full of contempt. Unlike Gabriel's mother, she is not a devout believer and is not allowed to acknowledge her thoughts in pity but in wrath.

But Gabriel belongs to category one for another reason other than the one of spiritual revenge against white men. As the most conspicuous character in this group, his hypocrisy should be discussed at this point. Perhaps Baldwin's remark that, "Negroes want to be treated like men,"\(^3\) is the basis of Gabriel's tormented mind. During the time of his mother's death, it comes upon Gabriel that life as he is living it will not allow him to become the man he wants to be. At his mother's bedside, when she is near the point of death, he concludes that to be in the service of the Lord is what will afford him the manliness he desires to achieve. This, of course, is the kind of life his mother has waited so long for him to commit himself to. She preaches it, prays for it, and even beats him into realizing it—her lifelong ambition—while he is growing up. Consequently, realizing that after her death there will be no one to depend upon but himself, Gabriel confesses within that he wants to serve the Lord:

Yes, he wanted power—he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed, His well-beloved, . . . He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God. It was later to become his proud testimony that he hated his sins—even as he ran towards sin, even as he sinned. He hated the evil 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. He was later to say that this was a gift bequeathed him by his mother, that it was God's hand on him from his earliest beginnings . . . \(^3\)

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\(^3\)Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 94.
Power is what Gabriel receives when he becomes a preacher. Masterful are his sermons to both the saved and the unsaved, as he assumes the role of an evangelist at revivals and in church meetings in his southern surroundings.

He believes in his decision to be a man for Christ and is confident that through him great miracles will be wrought. Nothing prevents him from being stalwart in his religious career until he meets Esther, an unabashed wanton, who Gabriel, at first, tries to lead to the altar of salvation with the best of intentions—he thinks. At this point in his life, the test of his complete submission to the religion he adopts confronts him. Before the episode, he goes so far as to select the most ostracized but most devout sister in his congregation for his wife. Deborah, who was raped by white men while a young girl and as a result was rendered barren, is the object of ridicule in her community until Gabriel generously decides that it is the Lord's will for him to free her from all this suffering through marriage. In his line of work, Deborah proves to be a sufficient spouse because she is humble, long-suffering, stoic, a servant to those in need, and most of all a staunch follower of the faith.

However, Gabriel begins to hate his homely, devout wife when he becomes attracted to Esther. Esther reminds him of his past life of sin, and he fights hard to keep his thoughts about her on a spiritual plane. Being unable to thrust her out of his mind or to look upon her as just one of many sinners who needed the Lord, Gabriel slowly finds himself yielding to his passions as he admits in the lines below. He says to Esther, finding himself almost embracing her in the kitchen of
their employer's deserted house, "Yes, you know . . . why, I'm all the

time worrying about you--why I'm all the time miserable when I look at

you." And finally, inwardly Gabriel thinks as he gives in to his
desires:

Soon it would be too late, he wanted it to be too late. That river, his infernal need, rose, flooded
sweeping him forward as though he were a long-drowned corpse . . . So he had fallen: for the first time
since his conversion, for the last time in his life, Fallen he and Esther . . Fallen indeed: time was
no more, and sin, death, Hell, the judgement were blotted out. There was only Esther . .

Since the time he had been engulfed in the religious trance that led
him to embrace Christianity, when, as Baldwin explains, " . . . this
was the beginning of his life as a man," Gabriel is never tested in
his faith until he decides to rescue Esther from her sinful life.

Just as passionately as he preaches saintliness, he equally as passion-
ately erases his own holy convictions from memory in the face of this
temptation.

Even though Gabriel dissolves his relationship with Esther after
nine days of surreptitious meetings, the idea of wilfully committing
adultery while continuing to preach plagues him throughout his life.

More devastating to him yet, is Esther's confession to him that she has
become pregnant as a result of the affair. The agony Gabriel develops
inside upon hearing the news never ceases to disturb him even when he
moves to Harlem and finds a new life for himself. He carries guilt

36 Baldwin, _Go Tell It on the Mountain_, p. 126.

37 Ibid., p. 126.

38 Ibid., p. 97.
feelings with him wherever he goes. His confession to Deborah about the whole affair does not stop him from feeling contaminated before the eyes of God. Furthermore, Gabriel does not forfeit his preaching career because of his sin, which causes the storm inside him to mount over the years. Every sermon he delivers thereafter reminds him of his guilt. He seeks to cleanse himself of the turmoil by relentlessly devoting himself to evangelical work. But his heart is not really in his work. Gabriel is haunted by the fact that he has given birth to a son out of wedlock, whose life with his mother will never be one of Christian devotion.

From the time he chooses Deborah to be his wife, he envisions the thought of having a son to follow in his footsteps and to carry on the glorious work of the Lord. But because of his weakness and because of Deborah's barreness, his dream is smashed. Upon learning of Esther's pregnancy, Gabriel forgets the lust he holds for her and assumes an air of righteous indignation for being accused of fathering her child. Out of fear for his reputation and of how the Lord would judge him—a holy vessel, tainted—he reacts vehemently to her plea for help:

"Girl . . . does you reckon I'm going to run off and lead a life of sin with you somewhere, just because you tell me you got my baby kicking inside your belly? How many kinds of a fool you think I am? I got God's work to do--my life don't belong to you. Nor to that baby, neither--if it is my baby."

With this outburst, Gabriel tries to amend his wrong doing by overlooking his part in Esther's predicament and attempting to place the burden of the deed all on her. He even suggests that she marry a past lover to

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39 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 131.
cover up her misfortune, an act which would thereby eronerate him from any dealings with her. She asks him what will they do about the situation and he replies:

I don't know . . . what we is going to do. But I tell you what I think you better do: you better go along and get one of these boys you been running around with to marry you. Because I can't go off with you nowhere.

In this confrontation between Gabriel and Esther, the preacher is thinking only of himself. Sin is added to sin because he suggests a conspiracy to hide his participation in the salacious affair.

The torment of how he has fallen from a high state of saintliness changes Gabriel into a different kind of character. Never confessing to God his transgression but harboring his guilt within instead, he is gradually transformed into a brutal character obsessed with religiosity. In the place of humility and compassion, Gabriel exhibits wrath and bitterness. He is determined more than ever to ruthlessly adhere to the Bible because of the inward guilt he feels. He hates Deborah because she is wiser and more Christian than he. But more specifically he despises her inability to bear children, which tears down his ivory tower of producing a royal lineage of saints.

In time, he comes to despise his second wife for having borne a son out of wedlock before meeting him—a son who seems to possess the capacity for being a preacher, while the son his wife bears for him portrays the very image of the devil. Gabriel hates his stepson as though he is responsible for being an illegitimate child. The very evil he

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40 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 132.
participates in with Esther haunts him in his stepson, in his son, Roy, and in Esther's son, Royal. All of them hate him. Royal never learns that Gabriel is his father, but he has a deep contempt for preachers. Roy detests the church and anyone connected with it, including his father. John, the illegitimate stepson, rages with hatred for Gabriel because he is aware of his stepfather's hatred for him. While at the altar, completing his prayer, Gabriel and John find themselves staring at each other with disgust:

Gabriel had never seen such a look on John's face before; Satan, at that moment, stared out of John's eyes while the Spirit spoke; and yet 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 Gabriel . . . stared in wrath and horror at Elizabeth's presumptuous bastard boy, grown suddenly so old in evil. He nearly raised his hand to strike him, but did not move, for Elisha lay between them.41

Upon entering the ministry, Gabriel chartered a smooth path for himself to the gates of Heaven. But having once stumbled, the path became stonier as he treaded it, leaving behind him lives filled with more bitterness than existed there in the first place. This is why Gabriel is a good example of church hypocrites primarily and of true believers secondarily.

Much like Gabriel in his persistence to be God's man, in his abstinence from the ways of the world, in his bitterness against whites, and in his distant attitude toward his family because he was given to

41Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 150.
deep introspection about his life, Baldwin’s father bears a striking resemblance to this character:

He had always been so strange and had lived, like a prophet, in such unimaginably close communion with the Lord that his long silences... never seemed odd to us... He spent great energy and achieved, to our chagrin, no small amount of success in keeping us away from the people who surrounded us, people who had all-night rent parties... people who cursed and drank and flashed razor blades on Lenox Avenue. He could not understand why, if they had so much energy to spare, they could not use it to make their lives better. He treated almost everybody on our block with a most uncharitable asperity. ...*2

Of his attitude toward whites, Baldwin has this to say:

It was clear that he felt their very presence in his home to be a violation... and by his voice, harsh and vindictively polite... In later years... he became more explicit and warned me that my white friends in high school were not really my friends and that I would see, when I was older, how white people would do anything to keep a Negro down. Some of them could be nice, he admitted, but none of them were to be trusted and most of them were not even nice. The best thing was to have as little to do with them as possible.*3

This description is reminiscent of Gabriel’s harsh warning to John about whites quoted on page three of this paper.

It is a revelation to Baldwin to hear his father’s eulogy wherein the preacher describes the elder Baldwin quite the opposite of how his family had seen him when he was alive. The author recalls this about the preacher’s testimony and his own reaction to it:

He presented to us in his sermon a man whom none of us had ever seen—a man thoughtful, patient, and forbearing, a Christian inspiration to all who knew him, and a model for his children... /Baldwin/ he had been remote

*2Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, pp. 74-75.

*3Ibid., pp. 75-77.
enough to be anything . . . the man they had not known may have been the real one. The real man, whoever he had been, had suffered and now he was dead. . . .

For Baldwin and his family, their father never presented the image so beautifully eulogized at the funeral. At least Baldwin's impression of his father is vastly contradictory to the preacher's.

Vividly the author describes his father's demeanor in this manner:

He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met . . . He claimed to be proud of his blackness but it had also been the cause of much humiliation and it had fixed bleak boundaries to his life . . . I do not remember, in all those years, that one of his children was ever glad to see him come home. 45

Baldwin goes on to say that his father's life as a minister became more unsuccessful as he grew older because he pastored increasingly smaller congregations as the years passed. The author concludes that, "He lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit. . . ." 46 This bitterness, Baldwin admits, was passed on to him—a bitterness toward the white world. In a larger sense the author's father falls into the fantasy revenge grouping, but otherwise he seems to belong to the second sub-division of true believers.

John is the main character in Go Tell It on the Mountain and can be placed, first of all, in the third category of Baldwin's characters because he is definitely not religiously inclined (although he goes through the motions) until he receives a religious experience on "The

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44 Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 88.
46 Ibid., p. 73.
"Threshing Floor." What he wants is to be totally loved and accepted by his stepfather. The novel never divulges whether or not John gets his wish. Immediately in the novel, John's attitude toward the church is revealed:

When he was young, John had paid no attention in Sunday school, and always forgot the golden text, which earned him the wrath of his father. Around the time of his fourteenth birthday, with all the pressures of church and home uniting to drive him to the altar, he strove to appear more serious and therefore less conspicuous.47

At an early age, John develops a distaste for church because it is forced upon him. He watches the saints perform during the services in awe and fear. When they sing he, at that moment believes that God is near. But when it subsides, John resumes his posture of disbelief.

He fights becoming enraptured like those he sees during worship. He resents their piety because he wants to follow another course in life and not be like them at all:

The darkness of his sin was in the hardheartedness with which he resisted God's power; in the scorn that was often his while he listened to the crying, breaking voices, and watched the black skin glisten while they lifted up their arms and fell on their faces before the Lord. For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father's fathers. He would have another life . . . it was said that he had a Great Future. He might become a Great Leader of his People. John was not much interested in his people and still less in leading them anywhere, but the phrase so often repeated rose in his mind like a great brass gate, opening outward for him on 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 would eat good food, and wear fine clothes, and go to movies as often as he wished.48

47Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 13.
48Ibid., p. 19.
For the most part in the novel, John is portrayed as a character much disturbed by the confined environment in which he must exist and by the world beyond his to which he has been denied access, not only by the white people who created it and lived in it but more specifically by his father. It is John's father who causes him to hate his immediate surroundings and inwardly long for eventual escape into the world forbidden him.

Hating his father, the church he attends so often, the church members he observes praising the Lord each day with nearly every breath they take, John, at the same time, learns to hate God for wielding such an influence over those around him, who prevent him from living the kind of life he desires. Therefore the church, its people, the God they serve form a kind of invincible wall around John which makes him that much more eager to claim the way of the flesh and ignore the way of the spirit. He is obsessed with the idea of learning his father and his father's world:

In the narrow way, the way of the cross, there awaited him only humiliation forever; there awaited him one day, a house like his father's house, and a church like his father's, and a job like his father's, where he would grow old and black with hunger and toil . . . but here, where the buildings contested God's power and where men and women did not fear God, here he might eat and drink . . . and clothe his body with wondrous fabrics. . . .

Yet for every moment John spends in revelry of how differently he would manage his life if he were free of his father, he also wonders about the thing he has always been taught to fear most and that is the judge-

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49 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 34.
ment of the Lord. John is not a true atheist because of the fear his father has hammered into him about God's power and vengeance. Yet he refuses to bow to Him; he is unwilling to bow because he sees Gabriel and God as one in the same.

In despising his father, he despises God. John's fear of God makes him wonder, "And then what of his soul, which would one day come to die and stand naked before the judgement bar? What would his conquest of the city profit him on that day? To hurl away, for a moment of ease, the glories of eternity?" Invariably after such a questioning of himself and of the religion that has such a hold on those around him, John returns to his dream of astounding his father by rejecting all that he stands for in becoming a defiant man. His outlook on life is broader than that of his father. Nevertheless he is not outwardly brazen in his reproach for his religious surroundings as in his brother, Roy. He holds it inside. But Gabriel, who has known sin and folly, sees the workings of John's mind in his countenance--his stares and his stiff obedience to Gabriel's commands.

It stirs the hidden hatred Gabriel develops for John because his stepson possesses the potential for being a great leader in spite of being a bastard. Gabriel cannot conceive of God giving John, a product of sin, this talent which should rightfully belong to his own son, Roy, who acts and speaks like Satan himself. Gabriel insists that his seed is meant to be royal and holy. Yet Roy is the kind of boy Gabriel expects John to be, for John was begotten in sin. He takes no pride in

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50 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 34.
John and attempts to abuse him physically and spiritually at every opportunity. He devotes his attention to Roy, who openly repudiates his father with derision.

Thus John masks his inner conflict with good manners and obedience, afraid to show his true feelings except when alone. When he steals away to see a movie downtown, he is thrilled by the personality of the heroine in the picture, for she is out of touch with religion and a symbol of what he wants to be:

Nothing tamed or broke her, nothing touched her, neither kindness, nor scorn, nor hatred, nor love. She had never thought of prayer. It was unimaginable that she would ever bend her knees and come crawling along a dusty floor to anybody's altar, weeping for forgiveness... She had fallen from that high estate which God had intended for men and women, and she made her fall glorious because it was so complete... He wanted to be like her, only more powerful, more thorough, and more cruel; to make those around him, all who hurt him, suffer as she made the student suffer, and laugh in their faces when they asked pity for their pain.51

So great is John's contempt for Gabriel that during a family feud when Gabriel hits Elizabeth, John remembers how highly respected his father is in the eyes of the church that never witnesses his brutality at home, and Baldwin relates John's feelings, "... this man, God's minister, had struck John's mother, and John had wanted to kill him--and wanted to kill him still."52 He often thinks of his father's destruction, as Baldwin points out, "He lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John would curse him on his deathbed."53

51 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 39.
52 Ibid., p. 51.
53 Ibid., p. 21.
Without warning, Elisha, John's trusted friend and a true believer in the church, asks John does he want to be saved. And John's reply is, "I don't know."54 Such questions worry John, and it is the truth that he really does not know whether he wants to be saved or not. However, after being possessed in the tarrying service, the night of his fourteenth birthday, John comes out of the frightening experience transformed. He is not completely implanted in the faith, but he has found it to be a way of escape from the terror of his father as well as a more subdued means of revenge against him. John replaces the desire to win his father's love with an urgent dependency upon Elisha to lead him closer to God. He says to the worshippers, "I'm saved . . . I know I'm saved." But his father unconvincingly adds, "It come from your mouth . . . I want to see you live it. It's more than a notion."55

With his father evincing this kind of attitude, John knows he must seek the strength to endure from Elisha. He is proud when Elisha says, "I been praying, little brother . . . and I sure ain't going to stop praying now . . . You know right well . . . I ain't going to stop praying for the brother what the Lord done give me."56 And in a final plea for consolation, John implores, "Elisha . . . no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what anybody says, you remember--please remember--I was saved. I was there."57

54 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 55.
55 Ibid., p. 207.
56 Ibid., p. 219.
57 Ibid., p. 220.
John leans on Elisha as his mother once leaned on her father, Richard, and Gabriel. In the end, she and her son, both proud and unyielding, finally, submit to the religious life they are forced to accept being unable to escape the life to which they are confined.

About the aura that surrounds Baldwin's church people, the author has this comment to make:

There are probably more churches in Harlem than in any other ghetto in the city /New York/ and they are going full blast every night and some of them are filled with praying people everyday. This, supposedly, exemplifies the Negro's essential simplicity and goodwill; but it is actually a fairly desperate emotional business . . . Nightly, Holy Roller ministers, spiritualists, self-appointed prophets and Messiahs gather their flocks together for worship and for strength through joy.58

His description becomes more lucid as he depicts scenes of worship in Go Tell It on the Mountain. The required manner of dress, the worship service, the display of abandonment in song and testimony, all point up Baldwin's observation of those who cling to the church:

. . . the sisters in white . . . the brothers in blue . . . the white caps of the women seeming to glow in the charged air like crowns, the kinky, gleaming heads of the men, seeming to be lifted up . . . then Elisha hit the keys, beginning at once to sing, and everybody joined him, clapping their hands, and rising, and beating the tambourines . . . They sang with all the strength that was in them, and clapped their hands for joy.59

Even the appearance of the saints changes when service begins. They seem to be transported into a other realm of existence:

58Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 54.

Something happened to their faces and their voices, the rhythm of their bodies, and to the air they breathed; it was as though wherever they might be became the upper room, and the Holy Ghost were riding on the air . . . On Sunday mornings the women all seemed patient, all the men seemed mighty . . . the Power struck someone, a man or woman; they cried out . . . arms outstretched like wings, they began to Shout . . . the rhythm paused, the singing stopped, only the pounding of feet and the clapping hands were heard, then another cry, another dancer . . . Then the church seemed to swell with the Power it held, and, like a planet rocking in space, the temple rocked with the Power of God.60

At any service, the saints behave in the same fashion. They are caught up in an overwhelming emotional experience wherein they release all kinds of energy and even their frustrations.

Especially during the tarrying services, people are expected to pray, exhort the evil from themselves, and be carried off into spiritual trances. As a matter of fact, the tarrying service dominates the whole of this particular novel because it is through the prayers of the saints that the innermost thoughts of the characters are revealed. While praying, each silently looks back over his life and regrets the misery and evil experienced. Only Elisha and John fall under the spell of the trance while the service goes on. Within the trance, John sees visions of corruption and terror and as a result cries out in fear for the Lord's help in carrying him through his moment of trial. On the other hand, Elisha is caught up in the Spirit and is possessed by rapture and joy. While all this is taking place, it is the custom of the onlookers to moan and wail, to hover over those possessed and those praying at the altar, and at intervals one or more of the praying women may burst into

60 Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 15.
song. When the trance or prayer is ended, the saints all rejoice because another soul is freed from the hands of Satan. How different their response would be if they could look inside these suppliants and learn what they are truly like.

Baldwin is particularly concerned about the attitude of the young toward church, and, as he observes it, the attitude is not a healthy one:

What are they doing? Well, some, a minority, are fanatical church goers, members of the more extreme Holy Roller sects. Many, many more are 'moslems' by affiliation or sympathy, that is to say that they are united by nothing more--and nothing less--than a hatred of the white world and all its works.61

Again the fantasy-revenge idea crops up in this statement. The young participate in either of the faiths mentioned because of their hatred for whites. The church—Holy Roller or moslem—is what solidifies this minority of young people—not because they adhere to God or Allah—but because they seek retribution from whites. And their elders mainly embrace religion for the same reason. Some youngsters, like Elisha and John, find escape in the church, others, like their elders, search for revenge. The true atheists have not been discussed in this chapter, but as for the church members falling in sub-divisions one and two of Baldwin's characters, their appearance and speech are laden with holiness, yet within they are tormented with conflict.

In the next chapter, Baldwin's own experiences in the church will be discussed in addition to his decision to reject religiosity. Excerpts from his book of short fiction, Going to Meet the Man, will

61 Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, p. 56.
further substantiate the author's attitude about the debasing effect of Christianity on black people in the urban ghetto.
CHAPTER II

BALDWIN'S RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE IN HIS
ESSAYS AND SHORT STORIES

In the last chapter, Baldwin's observations were analyzed about the effect of religion on ghetto blacks. In this chapter, the author's own involvement in black ghetto religious practices and its effect on him will be disclosed, through excerpts from his essays. And to further vivify his experiences and spiritual metamorphosis, passages from the author's collection of short stories (Going to Meet the Man) will be included. It is the purpose of this chapter to expose the author's vacillating attitude toward religion.

Baldwin grew up in the church, was reared in a strictly religious home, and was confined to a church-centered environment. Still the church had no great impact on his life (as a matter of fact he was wary of it) until he was fourteen years old. This does not mean, however, that he exposed his indifference toward the church by acting rebelliously in his earlier years. Instead, he held it inside until his conversion was spent, at which time, he underwent a change in his whole attitude about being an American Negro, which was influenced directly by his concept of religion.

Baldwin projects how he felt about the church during his childhood in the following extract:

... I remember the church people because I was practically born in the church, and I seem to have
spent most of the time that I was helpless sitting on someone's lap in church and being beaten over the head whenever I fell asleep, which was usually. I was frightened of all those brothers and sisters of the church because they were all powerful, I thought they were. And I had only one ally, my brother ... we were united in hatred for the deacons and the deaconesses and the shouting sisters of our father.¹

Baldwin goes on to explain that one of the reasons for this hatred was that on Sundays these saints were always in his home eating up all the food, while the children sat in the kitchen hungrily waiting for the leftovers.² This was his father's way of fellowshipping with church members. And while the author's childhood frustrations were unsophisticated, they were real because as an adult he says in another passage:

I had inclined to be contemptuous of my father for the conditions of his life, for the condition of our lives. When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own.³

Lodged in his mind was the conviction that his father was chief contributor to the stifled existence which he led. The fact that his father was obsessed with religion added to Baldwin's state of misery.

Baldwin further divulges his father's relationship with his family by delineating the man's general demeanor during his declining years of illness and also the relief Baldwin and his family felt when their father was dead:

¹James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, Dell Books (New York: Dial, 1961), pp. 119-120.
²Ibid., p. 120.
In my mind's eye I could see him, sitting at the window, locked up in his terrors; hating and fearing every living soul including his children who had betrayed him, too, by reaching towards the world which had despised him... I began to wonder what could it have felt like for such a man to have had nine children whom he could barely feed. He used to make little jokes about our poverty, which never... seemed very funny to us; they could not have seemed very funny to him, either, or else our all too feeble response to them would have never caused such rages.4

Of his father's death, Baldwin reveals his family's reaction:

We had not known that he was being eaten up by paranoia, and the discovery that his cruelty, to our bodies and our minds, had been one of the symptoms of his illness was not, then, enough to enable us to forgive him. The younger children felt, quite simply, relief that he would not be coming home anymore. My mother's observation that it was he...who had kept them alive all these years meant nothing because the problems of keeping children alive are not real for children. The older children felt...that they could invite their friends to the house without fear that their friends would be insulted or, as sometimes happened with me, being told that their friends were in league with the devil...5

In the first chapter, it is stated that the author's father was much like Gabriel Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain. And from the foregoing quotations a similarity between the two can be appreciated. The religious and embittered martinet of a father feared by his family was the role of both Baldwin's father and Gabriel Grimes.

The dissension between a pious father and his children is also portrayed in "The Outing," a short story by Baldwin. Preparing to go on a spiritual picnic up the Hudson River, with the saints of the Mount

4Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 75.
5Ibid., p. 74.
of Olives Pentecostal Assembly, Roy protests his father's presence at the outing to his brother, Johnnie:

"Got a good mind to stay home . . . Probably have more fun. Why doesn't he stay at home?"

Johnnie . . . said lightly . . . "Oh, he'll probably be busy with the old folks. We can stay out of his way."

Roy sighed . . . "Be glad when I'm a man . . . ."6

In "Come out the Wilderness," the heroine, Ruth, remembers the harsh singlemindedness of her father when he dragged her to church, as a teenager, to make her repent for becoming intimate with her boyfriend in the family barn. Since Ruth had not committed the act, she openly refused to repent and this caused a breach between herself and her father.7 Divisiveness within the family as to how life should be lived is reviewed in Baldwin's essays and followed up in most of his fiction.

For the most part, the children in Baldwin's fiction are usually unimpressed by the holy appearance of their elders. A description from "The Outing" illustrates this idea:

The saints of God were together and very conscious this morning of their being together and of their sainthood; and were determined that the less enlightened world should know who they were and remark upon it. To this end there were a great many cries of 'Praise the Lord!' in greeting and the formal holy kiss. The children bored with the familiar spectacle, had already drawn apart and amused themselves by loud cries and games that were no less exhibitionistic than that being played by their parents.8


Because the children are not as mesmerized with spiritual fervor as their parents are, they soon tire of the ostentatious rituals that are common to them and grab every opportunity to escape the uncomfortable situations.

Not only do they seek distraction from religious settings, but children often use the disguise of religion to carry out some hidden plan of theirs. Baldwin noticed the change in the girls' attitude toward the boys, during the summer of his fourteenth birthday:

They did not tease us, the boys, anymore; they reprimanded us sharply, saying, 'You better be thinking about your soul!' For the girls also saw the evidence on the Avenue, knew what the price would be, for them, of one misstep, knew that they had to be protected and that we were the only protection there was. They understood that they must act as God's decoys, saving the souls of the boys for Jesus and binding the bodies of the boys in marriage.9

Under the guise of religion, the girls trapped some of the Harlem boys into marriage in order to save themselves from the horrors of street life. They were taught that religion would keep them unspotted from the world, and they used it to shelter themselves. Again, their very act points to the idea of religion being adopted as a means of escape, which is presented in the first chapter of this paper. In "The Outing," Johnnie's brother, Roy, is depicted as a deceitful little hypocrite who is supposed to be a convert. But he retorts to his friends, "... I got a Daddy-made salvation. I'm saved when I'm with Daddy ... And I ain't no baby, either, I got everything my Daddy got."10 In the same

10Baldwin, "The Outing," p. 27.
story, a boy named David wants to court Sylvia, the daughter of one of the saints. He persuades his friends to act righteously in front of Sylvia's mother so that he can be alone with the girl:

Now, let's act like we Christians ... If we was real smart now, we'd go over to where she's sitting with all those people and act like we wanted to hear about God. Get on the good side of her mother.\textsuperscript{11}

Thus religion is not real to many of the children who are reared in that kind of atmosphere. But they use it to their own advantage because they cannot avoid the wrath of their elders any other way. The same is also true of Baldwin.

Baldwin further admits his indifference to conversion in this passage:

As I look back, everything I did seems curiously deliberate, though it certainly did not seem deliberate then. For example, I did not join the church of which he preached. My best friend in school, who attended a different church, had already 'surrendered his life to the Lord,' and he was very anxious about my soul's salvation. (I wasn't, but any human attention was better than none.)\textsuperscript{12}

There is a carryover from the author's experiences in a religious atmosphere into his fiction. The devotion of the saints to their church is much like that of his father's. The deceptive and sometimes indifferent attitude of the children in Baldwin's stories resemble his own attitude when he was a child. If, according to his childhood, he were to be categorized like his characters are in the preceding chapter, he would be a combination of the hypocrite and the non-believer. But after

\textsuperscript{11}Baldwin, "The Outing," p. 27.

\textsuperscript{12}Baldwin, \textit{The Fire Next Time}, pp. 42-43.
his conversation, he could fall into the group of hypocrites; for although his surrender was superficially complete, he was somewhat driven toward the direction of religion because he feared the prospect of drowning in the squalor of Harlem streets as he grew up, and his motives were more than spiritual.

Baldwin's conversion was absolute because he became aware of the hopelessness of trying to find a worthwhile life outside the church. He wanted a worthwhile life. Nevertheless, it took the threshing-floor, so to speak, to bring him around to accepting the faith:

I underwent, during the summer that I became fourteen, a prolonged religious crisis... And since I had been born in a Christian nation, I accepted this Diety as the only one. I supposed Him to exist only within the walls of a church—in fact, of our church—and I also supposed that God and safety were synonymous. The word "safety" brings us to the real meaning of the word "religious" as we use it... I became... afraid--afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without... without any warning, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue had become a personal menace. It had not before occurred to me that I could become one of them, but now I realized that we had been produced by the same circumstances. Many of my comrades were clearly headed for the Avenue, and my father said that I was headed that way, too.

Conscious of the world surrounding his religious environment and the hideous alternative it offered him, Baldwin sought seclusion in the church. He adds, "It was my good luck... that I found myself in the church racket instead of some other, and surrendered to a spiritual seduction long before I came to any carnal knowledge."14 At this time the author became possessed in his friend's church.

14Ibid., p. 44.
Baldwin explains his spiritual seizure in this manner:

... everything came roaring, screaming, crying out, and I fell to the ground before the altar. It was the strongest sensation I have ever had in my life—up to that time, or since. I had not known that it was going to happen, or that it could happen. One moment I was on my feet, singing and clapping and, at the same time, working out in my head the plot of a play I was working on then; the next moment, with no transition, no sensation of falling I was on my back... I did not know what I was doing down so low, or how I had got there... All I really remember is the pain... it was as though I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me... I was on the floor all night... And in the morning, when they raised me, they told me I was 'saved.'

The aftermath of this trance left Baldwin wondering about why he had to undergo such a thing to find relief from his feelings of guilt. He conceded that he was saved but only because of the catharsis that overtook him:

Well, indeed I was, in a way, for I was utterly drained and exhausted, and released... from all my guilty torment. I was aware then only of my relief. For many years, I could not ask myself why human relief had to be achieved in a fashion at once so pagan and so desperate—in a fashion so unspeakably old and so unutterably new.

Although the author was extricated from his fear of the evil he harbored within, he also held a question in his mind as to why such a frightening experience had to be endured for one to become the Lord's anointed. And he answers this question at a later time in his life, as this discussion will reveal.

Following this experience, Baldwin decided against being just a follower but set out instead on a preaching career to greater fortify

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16 Ibid., p. 47.
himself against the temptation of the streets. Being in the pulpit was
intriguing to him, "The church was very exciting," he acknowledges.\textsuperscript{17}
He was overwhelmed by the effect of his sermons on the worshippers. "I
have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes,
without warning, fills a church, causing the church . . . to rock."\textsuperscript{18}
Baldwin was so caught up in the fervor existing inside the walls of the
church that he could hardly live without it, during the three years of
his ministry. To express his strong affinity for this new undertaking,
Baldwin remarks:

\begin{quote}
It was, for a long time, in spite of . . . the shab-

biness of my motives, my only sustenance, my meat and
drink. I rushed home from school, to the church, to the
altar, to be alone there, to commune with Jesus, my
dearest Friend, who would never fail me, who knew all
the secrets of my heart.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

This passage is evidence of how close Baldwin's relationship was with
his church and reiterates a foregoing comment he makes about God exist-
ning within the walls of his church, as indicated above.\textsuperscript{20}

His new found excitement did not last forever, for as the author
points out, he had begun to question his faith a year after he started
preaching and had started reading Dostoevski in high school. He recog-
nizes this period as the time of " . . . the slow crumbling of my faith,
the pulverization of my fortress. . . ."\textsuperscript{21} Confronted by literature on

\textsuperscript{17}Baldwin, \textit{The Fire Next Time}, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 49-50.
\textsuperscript{19}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 50-51.
\textsuperscript{20}See p. 9.
\textsuperscript{21}Baldwin, \textit{The Fire Next Time}, p. 51.
the one hand and verbal attacks against his faith by Jewish schoolmates on the other, caused Baldwin great perplexity. He saw more keenly the hypocrisy in the church, its preachers, and the prejudiced attitude of his father. With these incongruities in religious practices confronting him, in addition to the inner confusion resulting from his reading and talking with his Jewish classmates, Baldwin underwent a real spiritual metamorphosis which transformed him into an atheistic thinker.  

To begin with, Baldwin reflects on his religious trance with chagrin, stating that when he discovered why such an experience befell him, he also discovered the following:

... I was also able to see that the principles governing the rites and customs of the churches in which I grew up did not differ from the principles governing the rites and customs of other churches, white. The principles were Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others. I would love to believe that the principles were Faith, Hope, and Charity, but this is clearly not so for most Christians, or for what we call the Christian world.

In another excerpt, Baldwin speaks of the hopelessness of human love:

And if one despairs—as who has not—of human love, God's love alone is left. But God... is white. And if his love is 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 on the floor—not that answer, anyway—and I was on the floor all night.

This statement is a continuation of the author's description of his religious trance. The white sheriff in the story, "Going to Meet the Man,"

23Ibid., p. 47.  
24Ibid., p. 46.
is made to express the same question Baldwin asks above but for a different reason, when he is faced with a protest demonstration by young blacks in his town: "What had the good Lord Almighty had in mind when he made the niggers?"25 This is the same query Baldwin makes above, although his is phrased in another context.

Having become disillusioned with the church business, Baldwin rejects the Christian faith and any other yet continues to question the effect of religion upon black people. And he seems to have found no substitute for religion in people's lives. Thus one doubts his contention that he is an atheist as mentioned in the first chapter. He says:

> We human beings now have the power to exterminate ourselves; this seems to be the entire sum of our achievement. We have taken this journey and arrived at this place in God's name. This, then, is the best that God (the white God) can do. If that is so, then it is time to replace Him—replace him with what? And this void, this despair, this torment is felt everywhere in the West, from the streets of Stockholm to the churches of New Orleans and the sidewalks of Harlem.26

To show that the author chooses not to follow any religious organization, he admits his suspicion of the Black Muslim Movement, especially its leader, Elijah Muhammed: Of this self-appointed prophet Baldwin submits that:

> Heavenly witnesses are a tricky lot to be used by whoever is closest to Heaven at the time. And legend and theology, which are designed to sanctify our fears, crimes, and aspirations, also reveal them for what they are. I said /in the presence of the Muslim leader/"
... 'I left the church twenty years ago and I haven't joined anything since.' It was my way of saying that I did not intend to join their movement either.  

Baldwin's early religious experiences taught him to be suspect of any theology thereafter. A Black God is no alternative to a White God and both equally have a debilitating effect on the ghetto black worshipper. 
To use religion as a means of revenge is just as vitiating as to use it as a means of escape. The gospel songs that the black protesters sing repeatedly in front of the sheriff, in "Going to Meet the Man," are not meant to pacify or alleviate the fear, hate, and anger in whites but are intended to disturb them and torment them, as the sheriff concludes, when he wrestles with the problem of what these niggers had in mind by demonstrating in such a manner. He feels himself "drowning in niggers" and decides that, "They had not been singing black folks into heaven, they had been singing white folks into hell." Therefore, the fantasy revenge idea is at work once again in this short story of Baldwin's. The author reveals that blacks use their religion to achieve their own aims—for social revolution, to escape the conundrums of life instead of facing them squarely, and to satisfy their passion for vengeance against man's inhumanity to man. This is not as it should be, according to Baldwin. 

He has an idea of what God should be like, and this is why Baldwin does not completely fit the role of an atheist. This is why he is always questioning the role religion plays in human existence. The

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28 Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man," p. 205.
author hopes for this kind of God:

... God is ... not anybody's toy. To be God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you ... I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not as a means to control others.

Although the author hopes for a God of this nature, he is unable to see Him existing in this light, presently, because men have made Him or have used Him for their own selfish purposes.

Meanwhile Baldwin suggests that men move away from theology and start directing their minds and actions toward the dissolution of human conflict by themselves and for themselves, relying on no supernatural power for support nor acting in the name of one. To this end, he has the main character in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," remark:

For everyone's life begins on a level where races, armies, and churches stop. And yet everyone's life is always shaped by races, churches, and armies; races, churches, armies menace, and have taken many lives.

This thought is somewhat of a touchstone by which Baldwin chooses to mold his life and one which he believes other men should follow. In his own words, the same idea is repeated:

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death--ought to decide . . . .

29 Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, p. 113.

to earn one's death by confronting with passion the con-
undrum of life.31

In his fiction and personal comments, Baldwin offers the resolution that
religion among other things reduces man's ability to chart his own
destiny and resolve his own problems. Antithetically it adds to the
human dilemma, intensifies it, and makes greater the impossibility of
the conflict being diminished, instead of it being the antidote men
believe it is. Thus Baldwin considers himself an alien existing outside
of social customs and traditions.

Finally he proposes the following:

Now this country is going to be transformed. It
will not be transformed by an act of God, but by all of
us, by you and me. I don't believe any longer that we
can afford to say that it is entirely out of our hands.
We made the world we're living in and we have to make
it over.32

The above proposal is a re-statement of the two previous passages quoted.
Basically, Baldwin is continuing to request that black men and white
direct their own lives instead of waiting on God to do it for them.

Below, Baldwin acknowledges his current doubt about the tradi-
tional philosophies around which men build their lives:

I think all theories are suspect, that the finest
principles may have to be modified, or may even be
pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must
find, therefore, one's own moral center and move
through the world hoping that this center will guide
one aright.33

In spite of his decision that one must find his own moral center and


32Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, p. 126.

33Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 6.
follow it, Baldwin is not absolutely certain that this will bring fulfillment into one's life. He hopes it will. Remaining uncertain, yet pledging to see this decision through, Baldwin presents an attitude toward religion that seems mutable. Even while declining all faiths, the author is still disturbed about religious conversion, as one can detect from his delineation of non-believers.

The third chapter of this paper will entail a discussion of specific characters in Baldwin’s novels—*Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*. An analysis of these figures is intended to defend the hypothesis, stated in chapter one, that the atheistic characters or non-believers, placed in the third category, are spiritually tormented heroes.
CHAPTER III

ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM IN ANOTHER COUNTRY AND
TELL ME HOW LONG THE TRAIN'S BEEN GONE

Alienation is the prevailing theme in Baldwin's *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. Those characters who stand out in the novels are isolated from their immediate surroundings, the world at large, and spend the entirety of their duration trying to discover who they are and for what reason they exist. They are a complicated lot—not belonging to Baldwin's third category of characters merely because they are sinners—but because they cut themselves off from a dehumanizing world imposed upon them in the name of God. They are completely disenchanted with the confined existence men have forced upon them in the name of a white God. Consequently, they choose to live outside the accepted moral codes that seem to stifle those who live within their boundaries. The most important thing to characters Rufus and Ida Scott, in *Another Country*, and Leo Proudhammer, in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, is to find their own moral center and move within it.

Rufus, Ida, and Leo are tormented by moral conflict, perhaps more so than their religious counterparts they so deliberately avoid and despise. On the one hand, Ida has a remote connection with the church and is therefore more compassionate toward people, while on the other hand, Rufus and Leo do not have the slightest inclination toward reli-
gion and are astounded by the submissive attitude of religious blacks. What contributes to their amazement is their knowledge of the cruelty they as black men encounter in the New York streets. This is not to say that Ida does not encounter inhuman treatment as she searches for fulfillment, but she endures her suffering more successfully than either Rufus or Leo because she discloses her frustrations and acts according to her confessions.

At the heart of the alienation theme in the two novels is the turbulent black-white relationship in America. This is, in turn, firmly entangled in the web of religious indoctrination. Racial dissidence and religion are inseparable because the discussion of one invariably introduces the other as the root of the problem. If Rufus and Leo think of retribution against whites, they also include God (a white invention) in their thoughts. But it seems that all three characters live according to the survival-of-the-fittest theory, and to survive, they must outwit white people and the latter's white God.

They are alone. Like animals in the wilderness, they must fend for themselves by whatever means they can. The three believe that religion will only entrap them in the quagmire of despair as it has done for so many of their people, so they rebel against it or obliterate it from their minds. To escape the convenient prison of religion at the disposal of white people, Rufus, Ida, and Leo move among white people with suspicion, arrogance, and contempt as their shield, while moving with fear and pity among religious blacks and black victims of the streets.

New York is the proper setting for the portrayal of these
detached characters. Baldwin explains what it is like, trying not to be trodden underfoot in such a city:

It was a city without oases, run entirely ... for money; and its citizens seemed to have lost entirely any sense of their right to renew themselves. Whoever ... attempted to cling to this right, lived in New York in exile—in exile from the life around him; and this ... had the effect of placing him in perpetual danger of being forever banished from any real sense of himself.  

So it is with the three figures to be discussed. They choose to live in exile and fail to find themselves as they wander along life's course. Rufus cannot withstand the pressures of life and drowns himself to escape them. Ida is last pictured as unfulfilled after having tried to strike back at the white world. Leo finds material success only to discover that there is an emptiness in his life. All three are progenies of Harlem.

Rufus is too infuriated, too enraged, too full of desperation to survive the forces of the world he endeavors to live beyond. In love and out of love, he seeks retaliation against white atrocities toward black people. Upon meeting and seducing his white girlfriend, Rufus makes love to her out of malice toward whites and their God: "He wanted her to remember him the longest day she lived ... nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings."  

Too often thereafter when Rufus is intimate with Leona, he feels this same contempt, they have scathing arguments and he beats her unmercifully. His kind of love eventually sends Leona to an insane

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2Ibid., p. 24.
asylum and leads him to suicide. Before committing suicide, Rufus is pictured rebuking God for making his life so unbearable: "He raised his eyes to heaven. He thought . . . "Ain't I your baby too? He began to cry." Here the question is raised as to whether or not black people belong to God too; and, if they do, why is so much humiliation inflicted upon them. The same question is posed by Baldwin. Rufus does not gain a sense of himself. It is his desire to gain it by alienating himself from the world, but he learns that even this produces desolation.

Leo's approach to life is quite different from Rufus's, although he too feels abused and nauseated by white domination. His shield of arrogance prevents his being pulled under a tide of depression and despair. He acknowledges:

I know that, as I grew older, I became tyrannical. I had no choice, my life was in the balance. Whoever went under, it was not going to be me—and I seem to have been very clear about this from the very beginning of my life.

In another passage, Leo emphasizes his determination not to bow to God or anyone else and further ruminates on the futility of one taking such a stand. However, he does not alter the direction of his life simply because he discovers the influence of God in human affairs; he is bent upon living as he thinks he should:

... to what god indeed, out of this despairing place, was I to stretch these hands? But I also felt . . . that any god daring to presume that I would

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3Baldwin, Another Country, p. 78.
4See chapter two, p. 47.
stretch out my hands to him would be struck by these hands with all my puny, despairing power; would be forced to confront, in these, my hands, the monstrous blood--guiltiness of God. No. I had had quite enough of God--more than enough. . . . the horror filled my nostrils, I gagged on the blood-drenched name; and yet was forced to see that this horror, precisely, accomplished His reality and undid my unbelief.
I was beginning to apprehend the unutterable dimensions of the universal trap. I was human, too.6

By keenly observing life around him as he matures, Leo creates a protective shield of haughtiness about him. He feels that God is responsible for the whole plight of human existence in America and has had a particularly detrimental affect on black people. He absolutely refuses to submit to any will outside of his own, afraid of being ensnared in the trap like so many of his people. Leo's isolation from his own people, people in general, exposes a purely self-centered attitude and causes him to accept and even resign to a life of alienation he does not really enjoy.

Ida's religious attitude is somewhat different in contrast to Rufus's and Leo's. What the three have in common is the search for self-fulfillment beyond the confines of life around them; but each one's plan for surmounting the racial-religious confusion about him is singular. Rufus does not trust religious involvement and, as a result, stays away from it. Leo tries to smother it out of his life because he sees it as a plague. However, Ida carries traces of religion inside even though she attempts to exist beyond its clutches. Evidence of her attraction toward religion is disseminated in this excerpt from a conversation between herself and Vivaldo, Ida's white lover:

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6Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, pp. 75-76.
'I used to have religion, did you know that? A long time ago, when I was a little girl.'

... 'You still do have religion,' he said.

'You know, I think I do? It's funny, I haven't thought of church or any of that type stuff for years. But it's still there, I guess... Nothing ever goes away... It seems to go away, but it doesn't, it all comes back.

... I guess it's true, what they used to tell me-- if you can get through the worst, you'll see the best.  

Therefore Ida is not entirely released from her early religious indoctrination. While its impact on her has subsided and she does not depend upon religion to see her through life, its mark is left upon her. She is more inclined to think that white men are responsible for human conflict rather than to blame the predicament entirely on God. Her rebellion is against the white society and unless caught in a moment of sentimentality, Ida seems to act out of total insensibility to God.

At the beginning of Another Country, Rufus stands on the edge of insanity or doom. Before he decides to give up, he is confused and bewildered. Perhaps the song that is sung at his funeral best describes Rufus:

I'm a stranger, don't drive me away.
I'm a stranger, don't drive me away.
If you drive me away, you may need me some day,
I'm a stranger, don't drive me away.

This song of alienation has a barren, cold setting; "People sat rather scattered from each other--in the same way, perhaps, that the elements of Rufus's life had been scattered--and this made the chapel seem

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7 Baldwin, Another Country, p. 126.
8 Ibid., p. 104.
emptier than it was."9 Somehow the song and the setting depict a gloomy isolation surrounding the dead man.

Even in the preacher's eulogy, the impression received is that Rufus was lonely not by choice but by the circumstances life imposed on him. Furthermore, the eulogy rings with admonition for those present who are also alienated:

'... I know some of your faces and some of you are strangers to me ... But ain't none of us really strangers. We all here for the same reason. Someone we loved is dead ... He had a hard time getting through this world and he had a rough time getting out of it ... we was always pretty good friends, Rufus and me ... even though he didn't never attend church service like I--we--all wanted him to do ... He had to go his way ... I know a lot of people done took their own lives and they're walking up and down the streets today and some of them is preaching the gospel and some is sitting in the seats of the mighty. Now you remember that. If the world wasn't so full of dead folks maybe those of us that's trying to live wouldn't have to suffer so bad.'10

The preacher simply says that those in attendance loved Rufus; he was a loner, he was good, but he suffered and died. Yet he also warns that the world is full of people without purpose, physically alive but dead otherwise. They are the ones who clutter up the lives of those having found some purpose in living and make it complicated for them to maintain that purpose. Cass, a white acquaintance of Rufus, thinks of how Rufus's father might feel about his son's life: "What had Rufus been to him?--a troublesome son, a stranger while living and now a stranger forever in death. And now nothing else would ever be known

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9 Baldwin, Another Country, p. 103.
10 Ibid., pp. 104-105.
... It would never be expressed now. It was over."\(^{11}\) This kind of introspection adds to the portrait of Rufus as an alienated character.

As for Leo, his character grows and develops as he reflects upon the stages of his life and career. At once in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Leo unfolds his heritage:

... our father . . . was a ruined Barbados peasant, exiled in a Harlem which he loathed . . . he brought with him from Barbados only black rum and a blacker pride, and magic incantations which neither healed nor saved. He did not understand the people among whom he found himself, for him they had no coherence, no stature and no pride.\(^{12}\)

Obviously his father does not believe in Christianity. This, Leo graphically states and in doing so, he further admits the absence of the faith in himself, in the conversation below. He, Barbara and Jerry (white friends) are talking. Leo asks Jerry:

'Did you ever believe it? I mean, you know--the son of God and heaven and hell and judgement. You know. The whole bit.'

'My mother and my father believed it . . . So I believed it, too.'

'You never believed it, di you, Leo?' Barbara asked. 'You never even went to church.'

'No. My father didn't believe it. So none of us believed it. Naturally.'\(^{13}\)

Thus his heritage is pagan and not Christian. He does not begin in the church; he only despises what he has seen it do to his brother and the close connection between religion and white men's inhumanities.

In his childhood, his brother, Caleb, was his idol. Caleb taught

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\(^{11}\)Baldwin, *Another Country*, p. 106.

\(^{12}\)Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, p. 11.

\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 206.
Leo to intrepidly hate white people. An encounter he and Caleb have with the police illustrates how Leo feeds on the hatred Caleb vents against white men:

I watched the white faces ... I memorized the eyes ... the contemptuous eyes. I wished that I were God. And then I hated God. [Caleb, after the policemen leave, says:] 'Thanks, all you scum-bag Christians.' He raised his face to the sky. 'Thanks, good Jesus Christ. Thanks for letting us go home. I mean, I know you didn't have to do it. You could have let us just get our brains beat out. Remind me, O Lord, to put a extra large nickel in the plate next Sunday.'

Remarks like this from Caleb, before his conversion, amplify Leo's contempt for God. Leo's love for his brother is so strong at first that anything hurting Caleb hurts him twice as much. Anything his brother detests, Leo loathes it even more.

Therefore when Caleb tells Leo about the tortures he suffered in prison from white guards, Leo lambasts God in his mind while committing incest with Caleb:

I cursed God from the bottom of my heart ... I called Him the greatest coward in the universe because He did not dare to show Himself and fight me like a man ... I hoped that God was watching. He probably was. He never did anything else. I knew ... what my brother wanted, what my brother needed, and I was not at all afraid--more than I could say for God, who took all and gave nothing; and who paid for nothing, though all His creatures paid ... I'll love you, Caleb, I'll love you forever, and in the sight of the Father and the Son and the ... Holy Ghost and all their filthy hosts, and in the sight of all the world, and I'll sing hallelujahs to my love for you in hell. 15

Leo is not worried about social repercussions at this moment; he is only aware that his brother has been persecuted and God is the culprit. The

14 Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 45.

15 Ibid., pp. 162-163.
most he can do to the invisible being is curse Him and let Him know how awful his scorn is.

Later in his life, Leo finds himself wondering about what kind of beings white people are because he really does not understand them and their approach toward black people:

How could we fox them if we could neither bear to look at them, nor bear it when they looked at us? And who were they anyway? which was the really terrible, the boomerang question. And one always felt: maybe they're right. Maybe you are nothing but a nigger, and the life you lead, or the life they make you lead, is the only life you deserve. They say that God said so—and if God said so, then you mean about as much to God as you do to this red-faced, black-haired, fat white man.16

There is a hint of resignation in Leo's thoughts above. However, he concludes his thoughts with an abusive retort against God and the white man.17 Around the same time in his life, Leo discovers that while he has yet to achieve his goal in life; those around him seem to have found theirs. The discovery produces some resignation and disappointment in him:

... I was twenty-five, and I was terribly ashamed of the life I lived. Everyone had found the life that suited them; but I hadn't. Caleb looked safe and handsome... he had become a preacher and was now assistant past or at The New Dispensation House of God. Now, he had a wife and a home and he'd have children, all according to God's plan. But, my life! It made me, I know, very defensive and difficult... I was a bum, a funky, homeless bum... who really knew no one because I didn't want to know the people in my condition, I was not going to make peace with it.18

17 Ibid., p. 173.
18 Ibid., pp. 313-314.
While disappointed that fulfillment has not come for him, Leo does not give up his quest for it. His arrogance still enables him to keep searching. But knowing that his brother has found a measure of inner peace while he has not creates a ray of self-pity within him. Nevertheless Leo does not wallow in self-pity.

Caleb's conversion is a powerful affront to Leo, who feels that his brother has betrayed him, upon becoming a Christian disciple. This act causes him to focus inwardly on himself more than ever. He is hurt and decides it is best to be detached from the world rather than to be part of it. To Caleb, he exclaims:

'That God you talk about . . . look at His handiwork, look!' And I looked around the avenue, but he didn't. He looked at me. 'I curse your God, Caleb. I Curse Him, from the bottom of my heart I curse Him. And now let Him strike me down' . . . And I walked away and left him.19

After this confrontation, Leo places his brother in the same category as those blacks already caught in the trap of religious imprisonment. For himself he concludes:

But I knew what I was going to do. I was alone all right; for God had taken my brother away from me; and I was never going to forgive Him for that. As far as the salvation of my own soul was concerned, Caleb was God's least promising missionary. God was not going to do to me what He had done to Caleb. Never. Not to me.20

His brother's attempts to win him over to God are useless. The hate that Caleb helped to implant in Leo's heart, when they both were younger, is fixed there forever. At this point, Leo feels that he is completely cut off from the world and he wants to be.

19 Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 326.

20 Ibid., p. 312.
The person he loves the most (Caleb) finds another love (God); thus Leo does not care to open his heart entirely to anyone else. He loves Barbara and Christopher but with reservations. He is always on guard against anyone wanting to get too close to him:

Everyone wishes to be loved, but, in the event, nearly no one can bear it. Everyone desires love but also finds it impossible to believe that he deserves it. However great the private disasters to which love may lead, love itself is strikingly and mysteriously impersonal; it is a reality which is not altered by anything one does. Therefore, one does many things, turns the key in the lock over and over again, hoping to be locked out. Once locked out, one will never again be forced to encounter in the eyes of a stranger who loves him the impenetrable truth concerning the stranger, oneself, who is loved. And yet—one would prefer . . . not to be locked out. One would prefer . . . that the key unlocked a less stunningly unusual door.21

At the time Leo makes the above assumption, he is old enough to have let all of his rage erupt, smolder, and finally extinguish itself. He is more or less a disinterested observer of life in his later years.

His alienation is conveyed in this excerpt: "I had never been at home in the world and had become incapable of imagining that I ever would be."22 Thinking along the same lines, he analyzes his feelings about living in America this way:

I wanted to get out of the country. I had had it among all these deadly and dangerous people, who made their own lives, and all the lives they touched, so flat and stale and joyless . . . I got along with them by keeping them far from me . . . My countrymen impressed me . . . as being, on the whole, the emptiest and most unattractive people in the world . . . But I also knew that what I had seen . . . I was part of these people, no matter how bitterly I judged them. I would never be

21Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 7.

22Ibid., p. 84.
able to leave this country. I could only leave it briefly, like a drowning man coming up for air . . .

For these people would not change, they could not, they had no energy for change . . . perhaps God would raise up a people who could understand. But God's batting average failing to inspire confidence, I committed myself to Christopher's possibilities. Perhaps God would join us later, when He was convinced that we were on the winning side. Then, heaven would pass a civil rights bill and all of the angels would be equal and all God's children have shoes.\(^23\)

Not only does Leo flee from the world mentally, but he longs to escape from those around him physically. He is disgusted with the state of human affairs in his country. In addition, Leo sardonically casts God into the picture again, reminding himself in so many words that He is only a figurehead.

The picture that Leo paints of himself as a man drowning above is similar to the way Rufus feels before he actually drowns himself. He tells his friend, Vivaldo, how he feels on the night of his death:

I don't need no company. I done had enough company to last me the rest of my life . . . How I hate them--all those white sons . . . out there. They're trying to kill me, you think I don't know? They got the world on a string, man . . . and they tying that string around my neck, they killing me . . . wouldn't it be nice to get on a boat again and go some place away from all these nowhere people, where a man could be treated like a man.\(^24\)

Basically Rufus and Leo feel the same kind of misery, judging from what they both say. They have had enough of white domination and want to extricate themselves from it. Neither of them wants to live among their countrymen.

This same bitterness is depicted in one of Ida's conversations

\(^23\)Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, pp. 254-255.

with Vivaldo about Rufus:

"I didn't know how—how to keep people away... People don't have any mercy. They tear you limb from limb, in the name of love. Then, when you're dead, when they've killed you by what they made you go through, they say you didn't have any character. They weep big, bitter tears—not for you. For themselves, because they've lost their toy..."

Each of the three characters, in his own way, asserts the same kind of rejection of mankind, and each specifically points a finger of distrust at white people.

But in casting a finger of scorn at the heartless attitude of people in general, Ida also makes an indictment against herself—perhaps unknowingly. For she uses Vivaldo in the name of love. She cheats on him, and her guilt appears in her fights with him, and in her verbal castrations of all men. She tells her white friend, Cass:

'You don't know... what it's like to be a black girl in this world, and the way white men, and black men, too, baby, treat you. You've never decided that the whole world was just one big whorehouse and so the only way for you to make it was to decide to be the biggest, coolest, hardest whore around, and make the world pay you back that way... You don't know we're in one of the world's great jungles... behind all them... trees... people are... fixing and dying... you don't know it, even when you're told... even when you see it.'

Ida is extremely bitter about the life she is forced to lead in order to survive, and she speaks to Vivaldo with the same kind of matter-of-factness she presents in the passage above. To Vivaldo, Ida explains:

'... I wasn't trying to torment you—whenever I did. I don't think that I thought about that at all.'

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In fact, I know I didn't, I've never had the time . . . You people think you're free. That means you think you've got something other people want—or need . . . And you do, in a way. But it isn't what you think it is . . . I feel sorry for them. I feel sorry for you. I even feel sorry for myself because . . . I've often wished you'd left me where I was . . . Down there in the jungle, black and funky—and myself.27

Ida has no qualms when it comes to making her frustrations known. She angrily shares them with Vivaldo and Cass. Rufus is the same; for he, too, lets Vivaldo know how cruel the world has been to him, as noted in a foregoing excerpt. Unlike Ida and Rufus, Leo keeps his frustrations mainly to himself. Only he is cognizant of his deep anxiety. Yet he and Ida are alike in this respect, both are able to withstand the strain they are under, whereas Rufus was not. Leo continues on the road to success in isolation carrying his despair with him. Ida releases her despair outwardly which enables her to survive.

In the same conversation with Vivaldo, Ida confesses the grief and vehemence she and her father share, when her family discovers Rufus's dead body:

'My mother got frightened, she wanted my father to pray . . . he shouted . . . Pray? Who, pray? I bet you, if I ever get anywhere near that white devil you call God, I'll tear my son and my father out of his white hide! Don't you never say the word Pray to me again, woman, not if you want to live . . . Maybe I hadn't loved him/her father7 before, but I loved him then . . . But I wasn't going to let what happened to Rufus, and what's happening all around me, happen to me. I was going to get through the world, and get what I needed out of it, no matter how.'28

In this confession, Ida's convictions coincide with Leo's. He is not

28Ibid., p. 350.
going to be pulled under and neither is she.

Listening to the militant arguments of his black lover, Christopher, Leo sinks farther into an alienated condition, believing that while Christopher's arguments are right, his solution to human conflict is just as cancerous as the ones presently existing. Christopher astonishes Barbara's parents (white) by saying:

'... you gave us Jesus. And told us it was the Lord's will that we should be toting the barges and lifting the bales while you all sat on your big, fat, white behinds and got rich.'

And in trying unsuccessfully to win Leo's approval of his belief in a revolution of violence, Christopher warns:

'... we ain't about to wait on him Jesus, and him the first one they got rid of ... They didn't want him to change their hearts, they just used him to change the map ... We can't afford to trust white people in this country ...'

Leo is not interested in revolution, he is only concerned with staying alive and living for himself. People bother him, moral codes created by people upset him, and so do violent uprisings also waged by people. His reply to it all is, "The only space which means anything to me ... is the space between myself and other people. May it never diminish." Leo actually means this although he tries to pacify Christopher's surprise by altering the statement. Inwardly Leo admits, "... freedom, not happiness, was the previous stone. One could not cling to happi-

30Ibid., p. 367.
31Ibid., p. 343.
ness—happiness, simply, submitted to no clinging..."32 Therefore, without happiness, Leo arrives at the pinnacle of success as an actor. But a void remains in his life. There are people around him, but he turns to no one for comfort. His material success does not bring him fulfillment.

The space that Leo insists upon having between himself and others is the same kind of space Rufus refers to when he says he needs no company, and it is the same kind of space Ida has in mind when she says to Cass, "Some days... I wish I could turn myself into one big fist and grind this miserable country to powder. Some days, I don't believe it has a right to exist."33 All three characters want either refuge from life or long for the annihilation of it. They are alienated figures made to live in exile, so they believe, because of white men's rules and white men's God.

The last chapter of this paper will offer a conclusion about Baldwin's attitude toward the black religious experience in the American ghetto. The attitude of religious blacks, Baldwin's own religious views, and the inner conflict of those who do not believe in a just God have been discussed at length in chapters one, two, and three, respectively. The final chapter is intended to summarize this discussion.

32 Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, p. 344.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This study of Baldwin's attitude toward the black religious experience in the American ghetto has endeavored to reveal how influential the author believes religion is in the lives of poor black city people. His fiction and essays are generously sprinkled with episodes, dialogues, and self examinations on this subject.

In his fiction, Baldwin allows three kinds of characters to either illustrate or express their positions on religious involvement and to what extent it affects the lives of black people. First, there is the church hypocrite who uses religion for some hidden purpose. He may use it as the only means of gaining a semblance of respect in his community, as a façade to cover up his lust for life, as a respectable racket to achieve a measure of material success, or even as a refuge in fear of being swallowed up in the squalor of street life. Next, there is the true believer, who thinks that religion is a rock in a weary land. The true believer expects God to furnish him with the hope of a better life after death, reap vengeance against his oppressors in a final judgement en masse, and supply him with the strength to meet the pressures of life through worship services. Then, there is the non-believer, who feels that religion is the most dehumanizing concept ever implanted in men's minds. He contends that its hold on black people is solely the work of white people. The invention whites use to bring
Negroes into submission, wherein they are robbed of the motivation to transcend domination by whites, is God. The atheistic or agnostic black character emphatically identifies God as a white God. The non-believer's general conclusion is that God has never helped black people. He has only snatched freedom from them. In this way, He fulfills the white man's intention to keep black people underfoot forever; thus, He is a white God.

Baldwin's hypocrites and true saints sometimes have overlapping characteristics and can therefore be placed in one large division of characters who are essentially looking for escape or revenge. It is only the manner in which the characters seek escape or revenge that determines whether or not they are real hypocrites or saints. Gabriel is a clearly defined hypocrite, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. However, his stepson, John, possesses the convictions of an agnostic, a hypocrite, and a true believer in the same novel. Still characters like Elisha, Elizabeth, and Florence are more saintly than either Gabriel or John, for they find strength to endure life in the church. Gabriel's religion is a facade. John's faith lies not in the church per se but in Elisha.

The author himself undergoes three stages in his attitude toward religion. As a young boy, he is indifferent toward the church. Around age fourteen, he begins to notice (with fear) the pitfalls of living in the Harlem streets and succumbs to a spiritual experience which drives him into church ministry for three years. After his first year of preaching, he takes another inventory of life around him, as a result of encountering literature and religious barbs from Jewish schoolmates.
Baldwin finally decides to be agnostic—doubting all theologies until a better one is produced. Passages from his essays and short stories convey the close scrutiny Baldwin has given the subject of religion and how he arrived at the conclusion that God has a terrible dehumanizing effect on people—black people particularly.

This conclusion leads Baldwin to write two novels of alienation—Another Country and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Attention is largely devoted to atheistic or agnostic characters, who have no use for God and hate the white world. They think of God and the white man as a dichotomy and neither can be escaped, unless the characters decide to live outside the moral codes of society. This is the decision these characters make. While they appear noble on the surface because they rebel against society and God, they suffer mental agony trying to avoid destruction in the streets or persecution by whites. What they do not discern until they have lived in alienation is that they are unprepared for the emptiness that accompanies such a life. The void that Rufus and Ida Scott experience in Another Country, just as Leo Proudhammer does in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone indicates to the characters that a rejection of codes and people does not promise them fulfillment. It may promise them a degree of escape, but it does not make them whole persons.

The fate of Rufus, Ida, and Leo depends on the strength of the last statement. They live beyond the world but they constantly observe it, verbally attack it, and blaspheme against God for causing them to have to flee the world's entanglements only to discover there is no hiding place. Rufus cannot endure a half-fulfilled life. He is too
passionate. He takes his life. Ida sees that she must continue to live as half a person in order not to end up like her brother. Her approach to inner conflict is more brazen and ruthless than her brother's. She is farther removed from the human scene than Rufus is. Yet Leo is the most perceptive of the three characters and the most alienated of the lot. He accepts his fate of loneliness with great aplomb. The more he sees of life the more he feels that he is a stranger in the world and should remove himself that much farther from it. This is an ambitious task for him to undertake, since he admits that no one should live in such a detached manner. Nevertheless, he is more comfortable away from people and their God, and is reasonably content being all alone.

In the final analysis, Baldwin shows how debilitating religion can be in the lives of ghetto blacks. Some become hypocrites because of it, others are made to bow to God because they think He will save them from the world, and still others see the misery religion inflicts upon their brothers and run from it—out of rage—to a desolate life of alienation. The white God has successfully completed His task of dehumanizing the black American ghetto-dweller, according to Baldwin.
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