

## **A Secular Pilgrimage with James Baldwin**

My wife Carol and I made a secular pilgrimage through the South this summer. For us, a secular pilgrimage is an educational mixture of Nature, Civil War, Civil Rights and local brews. It can be both delightful and disorienting—a creatively disturbing combination.

You may be familiar with some of the places we visited: Chattanooga's Lookout Mountain and Dayton (TN), Birmingham and Montgomery (AL), Atlanta and Stone Mountain (GA).

Each city was like walking through history, and much of that history is terrible and terrorizing. A war over slavery is still being fought. Huge rebel flags along the highway, Trumperstickers and "heritage" spots keeping the "lost cause" alive with gray Reb caps and Jeff Davis figurines. Of course, all these are framed by General Jesus leading the battle cry of secession.

This all holds a certain fascination, but thankfully there are rest stops for Reason all along the way. The Civil Rights Institute (CRI) in Birmingham tells the powerful stories of the struggle for basic human dignity. Situated across from the 16th Street Baptist church where four young black girls were murdered by a bomb in 1963, within view of Ingram Park where non-violent marchers were met with violent resistance, the Institute is an open classroom for anyone to face the disgraceful and cheer the courageous.

The CRI has an original steel door from the jail where Martin Luther King, Jr. was thrown for agitation and disruption. We stopped over at the site where he wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" in 1963, an epistle I've always thought prophetically biblical.

I bought a copy of James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" (1962) at the Civil Rights Institute. His writing immediately fired up my attention in the context of all we were learning about America's "race problem," especially linked to the country's "religion problem."

"Perhaps the whole root of our trouble," Baldwin writes, "the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses ... steeples ... races ... flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have."

Stunningly truthful in his eloquent honesty. We can suppose that being black, gay and secular constrained his story. As he perceptively observes in the essay, "Stranger in the Village" (*Notes of a Native Son*, 1955): "People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction." This is true, it could be said, for both color and creed.

Baldwin tells of the religious crisis of his youth with three years as a preacher in Harlem. He was raised to suppose that God existed “only within the walls of a church—in fact, of *our* church” and that “His blazing Hell” was ever to be feared and avoided.

In fact, his fears, amplified by the dangers—real or imagined—on nearly every corner, “rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into the church.”

Yet, after a short time as a youth minister (apparently more effective than his preacher father), he became deeply troubled by what he saw. There followed “a slow crumbling of my faith.”

“Being in the pulpit was like being in the theater; I was behind the scenes and knew how the illusion was worked.”

What Clergy Project member couldn’t relate to that? Or, hear this confession:

“When I faced the congregation, it began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike.”

Though his religious faith had become a “gimmick,” Baldwin still found some good in the old gospel temples and their mission to the streets: “perhaps we were, all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression.”

He watched as the lost souls around him found a variety of ways out of the ghetto.

“Many of my friends fled into the service ... others fled to other states and cities—that is, to other ghettos. Some went on wine, whiskey or the needle, and are still on it. And others, like me, fled into the church.”

Eventually he left the church. The fearful lack of love was too much. “Neither civilized reason nor Christian love would cause any of those people to treat you as they presumably wanted to be treated.”

He was determined “never to make my peace with the ghetto but to die and go to Hell” before he would be mistreated by anyone.

The image of descending to the hell of the ghetto recalled the way it felt as I slowly walked down into the Peace and Justice Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama under row after row of hanging columns, each with the names of lynching victims, black and white, county by county across the country. The stark inhumanity is nearly unbearable—something never to make peace with.

What Baldwin observes about the Black and White divide, though written over a half-century ago, has too many ringing truths for our time.

This statement may serve to summarize his indictment:

“In any case, white people, who had robbed black people of their liberty and who profited by this theft every hour that they lived, had no moral ground on which to stand.”

Each awful truth about race in America comes tangled in our religion. Baldwin deftly gazes at this knotted mess, attempts an unraveling and somehow finds a guarded hopefulness flagged with questions.

If this precarious, incendiary situation is “the best that God can do ... then it is time to replace Him—replace Him with what?” Should African Americans accept a Caucasian-constructed reality and society or stop to ask themselves, “Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?”

In Baldwin’s secular vision, white liberation will only come via black liberation and this will only happen when all ethnicities come to understand that we “deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women.”

Ironically, I presume, Baldwin employs the image of Noah’s flood, and the promise of the rainbow, to suggest humanity must learn to live together or perish in “the fire next time.”

Except in this vision, it appears God is not the issue. “Everything now is in our hands.” This could be a call to pilgrims, secular or spiritual, on the *via de la verdad* (the pilgrim-way toward truth).

Given his powerful testimony concerning race and religion, including his profound exodus from the slavery of loveless spirituality, I suggest we welcome James Baldwin as an honorary member of TCP.

Chris Highland  
July 2018

(originally published on Patheos)