

To find our way: James Baldwin at 100



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Influential writer James Baldwin (1924-1987) would be 100 on Aug. 2, 2024. From an early life of poverty in Harlem, to great fame as a writer and a powerful voice for Civil Rights, he stands as one of the leading truth-tellers (prophets?) of our time. As with most freethinkers, I would suggest the best way to gain an understanding of Baldwin is to read his work. However, we can't assume we will find comfort or consolation in his words, particularly when he addresses the role of religious faith in society.

In his essay, "A Talk to Teachers" (December 1963), Baldwin speaks his uncompromising truth: "My ancestors and

I were very well trained. We understood very early that this was not a Christian nation. It didn't matter what you said or how often you went to church. [We] knew that Christians didn't act this way." Even with his personal experience of serious racial divisions in the country, Baldwin had hope, and it began with education. He wished each child was taught to know their own worth, to use their "tremendous potential and tremendous energy" to help America to "find her way."

In his 1954 book, "Nobody Knows My Name," James Baldwin writes that some concepts of the divine simply aren't big enough. "It has got to be made much bigger than it is because God is, after all, not anybody's toy [but] a power which you cannot control." On his personal "journey toward something I do not understand," he explains: "I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not a means to control others." He expands on this later, in his 1963 book,

"The Fire Next Time." Describing his turbulent teen years as an evangelist, with the hot fear of both Hell and Harlem lurking at the door, he chose to cling to a fearful faith: "I accepted this Deity as the only one. I supposed Him to exist only within the walls of a church — in fact, of our church — and I also supposed that God and safety were synonymous."

We can't fully appreciate the incisive perceptions of James Baldwin, especially on religion, without keeping his believing background in mind. "Baldwin's Pentecostal experience is, in fact, essential to understanding his complex views on Christianity, which he espoused in his speeches and publications. His experience in the pulpit also served to inflect his overall stance on religion, and his ultimate rejection of it in the name of humanistic love" (National Museum of African-American History and Culture). Clearly this was a decisive, dramatic shift.

While "speaking as an ex-minister of the Gospel, and therefore, as one of the born again," he hopes never to forget the instruction to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit those in prison" ("Open Letter to the Born Again," 1979). Having preached this basic guidance of the gospel in his youth, he could now examine and expose the "exclusive private club" of many Christians and clearly state that: "the man of Galilee could not possibly hope — or wish — to enter" that club. Quite a disarming and damning observation.

In a powerful passage from "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin writes: "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving." As he states, any relevant God has to be a means of liberation, not control. Freethinkers like Baldwin may hold on to some theological threads, but without the dread, the fear

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that often wears the mask of faith. Whatever divisions fracture our communities, our nations, our world — that shake our stability — we can either be guided by a conception of a God who can make us more loving, or choose to be liberated to love, by a radical faith in ourselves. That will always be our own choice, and it matters.

One way I come to James Baldwin takes a cue from an earlier writer, Zora Neale Hurston, who described: “seeking after the inner heart of truth” (“Dust Tracks on a Road”). It won’t help to spiritualize or psychologize that. This inner discovery, if and when it actually is discovered, may feel more like a surgical probing than a journey or pilgrimage. Baldwin and Hurston and many other likeminded voices are not whispering gentle assurances, but pushing us, grabbing us by the arm to pull us, in the direction we resist going. I suspect they wouldn’t object to comparing that pushing and pulling to the insistence of all famous founders of faith, including Jesus himself.

In this centennial year of his birth, it’s my view that James Baldwin should be celebrated, not only with great honors, but with serious listening, since his words continue to call us to find our way.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).