UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE - FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Reflections on Religion: Richard Wright and James Baldwin

(Richard Wright, James Baldwin a jejich vztah k náboženství)

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Praha, srpen 2012

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Abstract

The thesis seeks to explore how religion is depicted in the works of two of the most influencial African American authors of the 20th century, Richard Wright and James Baldwin. The analysis takes as framework Wright and Baldwin's mutual discussions about how to properly articulate the African American experience in literature. The thesis examines an autobiographical work and a novel by each author. In Wright's case, the books that are discussed are his two-volume autobiography, which consists of a first part dealing with Wright's childhood and early youth in the American South, called *Black Boy*, and a second part, *American Hunger*, recounting his adult life in the North. Furthermore, his major novel *Native Son* is analyzed. In the case of Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, i.e. two essays which elaborate on different episodes from Baldwin's life, and the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are examined. The discussion is completed by insights offered by Wright in his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born", and by Baldwin in the essays "Everybody's Protest Novel", "Many Thousands Gone", and "Alas, Poor Richard!" The first section of the thesis deals with the criticism Baldwin advanced against Wright in several essays, in which Baldwin was suggesting that Wright's angry writings have only reinforced the discourse of the whites, with Baldwin and Wright's subsequent quarrels, and with the issues Baldwin's comments on Wright's work raise. Next the ways in which religious and racial discourse are intertwined in American society are examined. The discussion of the topic as it can be traced in the two authors' works is complemented by general information about the historical context of African American Christian religious practice in America. The following part of the thesis explores how racial discourse influences religious views within African American communities, be it on the level of the family or of the community as a whole. Both Baldwin and Wright stress the oppression the African Americans have had to face from the white society, and in their works it can be observed how such a pressure leads the black characters to a dichotomized vision of the world. As a consequence, individuals seem paralyzed by a fear of being labeled as "sinners" and being doomed forever. Within this context, the thesis also looks into the church rituals that are characteristic of African American religious communities, focusing especially on the exceptionally emotionally powerful folk sermons, which are evoked in both Wright's and Baldwin's works. Finally, the thesis traces Wright's and Baldwin's reasons for rejecting religion as an oppressive institution, and it examines what alternatives to an acceptance of the religious discourse they offer in the works which are discussed.

Key words: James Baldwin, Richard Wright, religion, racial discourse, community, identity

Abstrakt

Záměrem této práce je prozkoumat zobrazení náboženství v dílech dvou z nejvlivnějších afroamerických spisovatelů dvacátého století, Richarda Wrighta a Jamese Baldwina. Analýza si za svůj rámec bere Baldwinovy a Wrightovy vzájemné diskuze, jejichž podstatou byla otázka, jak v literatuře uspokojivě artikulovat zkušenost černošské menšiny ve Spojených státech. Práce se zaměřuje na jedno autobiografické dílo a jeden román od každého z autorů. V případě Wrighta analyzuje jeho dvoudílnou autobiografii, jejíž první část, nazvaná *Black Boy*, se zabývá Wrightovým dětstvím a mládím na americkém Jihu, druhá část, *American Hunger*, pak popisuje Wrightovu zkušenost s životem na Severu. Dále se práce věnuje jeho románu *Native Son*. V případě Baldwina se práce zaměřuje na dílo *The Fire Next Time*, které se skládá ze dvou esejí rozvíjejících Baldwinovy vzpomínky na různé epizody z jeho života, a na román *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Dizkuse zaměřená na tyto díla je doplněna vhledy, které poskytkl Wright ve své eseji "How 'Bigger' was born" a Baldwin v esejích "Everybody's Protest Novel", "Many Thousands Gone" a "Alas, Poor Richard!". První kapitola práce se zabývá kritikou, kterou vznesl Baldwin proti Wrightovi v několika svých esejích, v nichž prezentoval svůj názor, že Wright svými zlostnými spisy pouze posiluje diskurz bělošské většiny. Dále se tato kapitola zabývá spory, jež po zveřejnění této Baldwinovy kritiky mezi autory vyvstaly, a otázkami, které jeho kritika vzbuzuje. Poté jsou zkoumány způsoby, jimiž je v americké společnosti provázán náboženský a rasový diskurz. Toto téma je sledováno v dílech obou autorů a jeho analýza je doplněna obecnými informacemi vztahujícími se k historickému kontextu křesťanské náboženské praxe v rámci černošské menšiny v Americe. Následující kapitola zkoumá, jak rasový diskurz ovlivňuje náboženské postoje uvnitř černošských komunit, ať už na úrovni rodiny či jednotlivých komunit jako celků. Jak Baldwin, tak Wright se soustředí na utlačování, kterého jsou Afroameričané oběťmi, a v jejich dílech je možné vystopovat, jak tento tlak vede u takto perzekuovaných jedinců k dichotomizovanému pohledu na svět. V důsledku pak jako by tito lidé byli paralyzováni strachem, že budou označeni coby "hříšníci," a následně navždy zavrženi. V tomto kontextu se práce rovněž zabývá náboženskými rituály, které jsou pro afroamerické komunity charakteristické, a zaměřuje se především na mimořádně emocionálně silná lidová kázání, jež jsou evokovány jak v Wrightových, tak v Baldwinových dílech. V závěru se práce věnuje Wrightovým a Baldwinovým důvodům pro zavrhnutí náboženství jakožto utiskující instituce a zkoumá, jaké alternativy k přijetí náboženského diskurzu autoři v analyzovaných dílech nabízejí.

Klíčová slova: James Baldwin, Richard Wright, náboženství, rasový diskurz, komunita, identita

Table of Contents

0. Preliminaries

Throughout the thesis, in-text citations are used for works by the two authors discussed, and footnote citations are used for all other works cited. The abbreviations present in the text are:

AH	*American Hunger*
APR	"Alas, Poor Richard!"
BB	*Black Boy*
EPN	"Everybody's Protest Novel"
FNT	*The Fire Next Time*
HBWB	"How 'Bigger' Was Born"
Mountain	*Go Tell It on the Mountain*
MTG	"Many Thousands Gone"
NS	*Native Son*

1. Introduction

Richard Wright and James Baldwin were two of the most influential African American writers of the 20th century. In their works both sought to offer a realistic representation and analysis of the situation of the African American minority within American society, and both uniquely contributed to raising an awareness of the particular challenges black people in America have had to face. Wright wrote violent works which offered an uncompromisingly harsh view of the relations between the white majority and African Americans, emphasizing the "alienation of the black man from the white rationalizations of ordinary life and social order."[1] Baldwin, who was younger by a generation, had the advantage of being able to build upon and expand the discourse established by authors such as Wright. However, in Baldwin's view, African American literature had been so far failing to reach its full artistic potential, as well as its potential to change the general perception and self-perception of African Americans. Afraid that "anger might not be enough and that protest might turn out to be a sterile box in which the middle-class whites, murmuring their guilt and sympathy, would be delighted to keep Negro writers locked,"[2] and although he looked up to Wright with great admiration, Baldwin decided to adopt an openly critical stance on Wright's works. The issues that he raises in his criticism are essential to a reflection about how African American consciousness can best be articulated in literature.

This thesis aims to explore Wright's and Baldwin's representations of one particular aspect of the human experience, namely that of religious life. The relationship of the African Americans to religion is a particularly complex one. The Christian religion was imposed upon black people by the white majority, and was subsequently used to keep them subjugated. At the same time, African Americans were able to find in the biblical stories a hope of future justice and deliverance, and religion helped their communities become more cohesive. Nevertheless, the African Americans' self-perception has been plagued with residual feelings of inferiority, some of which have been forced upon them by the means of white religious discourse. Added to the pressure black people already have had to face from the whites, such an internalization of a sense of inadequacy has lead to a heightened tension within African American communities.

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[1] Kingsley Widmer, "Black Existentialism: Richard Wright," *Modern Black Novelists*, ed. Michael G. Cooke (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 84.

[2] Irving Howe, "James Baldwin: At Ease in Apocalypse," *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays,* ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 97.

The thesis will focus on four works, one major novel and one autobiographical writing by each author. In Wright's case, the novel will be *Native Son* (1940), which tells the story of Bigger, a young black man whose fear of the white world leads him to unintentionally murder a white woman. However, instead of admitting his act was a mistake, he takes inner responsibility for his crime and for the first time in his life feels able to make active decisions instead of only passively reacting to his surroundings. In the process, he ends up murdering his girlfriend, getting caught by the police and is finally executed, but not without first reaching a certain sense of freedom of consciousness.

Moreover, the thesis will examine Wright's two-volume autobiography, consisting of *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*, which were originally meant to form one book, but have at first been published separately, *Black Boy* being printed in 1945 and *American Hunger* only having been made public several years after Wright's death, in 1977. *Black Boy* traces Wright's life from his early childhood to the point when he decided to leave the South and head North in the hope of a better, freer, more independent way of life. Throughout the book, religion is discussed mainly in connection with the ever-persisting attempts of Wright's family at persuading the young Richard to embrace religion.[3] *American Hunger* elaborates on Wright's struggles as a young writer in the North, and puts a strong focus on his involvement and subsequent disillusion with the Communist Party. As all mentions of religion in *American Hunger* consist of parallels being made between religion and communism, this part of Wright's autobiography will only be discussed in the last section, which deals with the possible alternatives to a religious outlook on life.

Baldwin's work will be represented by *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1954), a novel about an African American boy called John, who comes from a deeply religious family and is considering whether to follow in his father's footsteps and become a preacher. Although he seems tempted to detach himself from his community, on the day of his fourteenth birthday, when the main storyline takes place, John joins his parents' congregation in prayer and seems open to accept his parents' worldview. However, things turn out to be more complicated than they seem and along with the decision to embrace religion comes for John a "necessity to

[3] To distinguish the author from his slightly fictionalized younger persona, the narrator and main protagonist of *Black Boy* will be referred to as "Richard" whereas the writer will remain "Wright".

reckon with a black past."[4] Although John undergoes religious conversion, the ending of the novel is ambiguous as the understanding the reader has reached exceeds that of John. Through recollections of John's family members the reader gets acquainted with many elements from the family's past, and most importantly with the fact that Gabriel is not John's biological father. As a widower Gabriel married John's single mother and adopted John in an attempt at repentance for his previous acts, which included cheating on his barren wife and refusing to take care of the illegitimate child whom he conceived with his mistress. Although Gabriel promised John's mother he would love John like his own child, he feels hatred toward him as John is doing better than his younger brother, Gabriel's biological son Roy. This is something John feels but fails to understand.

The second work by Baldwin that will be discussed is *The Fire Next Time* (1963), which consists of two essays, presented by Baldwin as letters. In them Baldwin describes the position of African Americans in the United States, traces the roots of the current situation, and offers his views of the future of racial relations in America and in the rest of the western world. His discussion is based on his personal memories from the time when he was growing up and later when he had already become a writer. A significant portion of the text deals with Baldwin's religious experience and with the evolution of his attitude toward the church, first as a young preacher and then as a man who had distanced himself from the Christian religion and was approached by the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, who attempted, and failed, to enlist Baldwin for his cause.

The first section of the thesis will examine the context of Wright and Baldwin's interactions as writers working toward a common goal, and it will look into the criticism advanced by Baldwin against Wright. The next chapter will deal with religion in the works of the two authors in connection with the racial dynamics in American society as a whole. It will introduce the historical context in which African Americans adopted the Christian religion and demonstrate how white categorization has influenced African Americans' perceptions of their religion. The next section will explore Wright's and Baldwin's portrayals of religion within the African American community, and discuss how characters in Wright's and Baldwin's works are faced with pressure to embrace religion both from their closest family

[4] Charles T. Davis, "The Mixed Heritage of the Modern Black Novel: Ralph Ellison and friends," *Black Is the Color of the Cosmos; Essays on Afro-American Literature and Culture*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982) 324.

members and from their entire communities. In this respect Wright's and Baldwin's depictions differ; for Wright religion is always associated with subordination, whereas Baldwin also connects it with a possibility of increasing one's personal power. Ultimately though both authors perceive religion as judgmental and limiting, working as a constraining principle in people's lives, shaping their attitudes and defining their values for them. Both Wright and Baldwin show how people, influenced by religion, tend to view others in strict dichotomic categories, instead of actively making sense of things for themselves. However, both Baldwin and Wright also acknowledge the strength of the African American religious ritual, its uniqueness and its emotional power, which will also be discussed.

As both Wright and Baldwin ended up distancing themselves from religion, the last part of the thesis will deal with the reasons they provide for their rejection, as well as with the alternatives they suggest to a life governed by religious feeling. Both authors admit religion can serve an important function by providing people with a strategy to cope with the hardships they have to face, but both perceive such an approach as unsatisfactory, as it leads to a loss of the potential to strive as an individual. A solution is seen in a detachment from religion, and in personal empowerment through an acceptance of one's unique personal characteristics. A lot of credit is also given to the process of finding one's own voice, be it through writing or otherwise.

The overall view of the role played by religion is similar in Wright's and Baldwin's works. Both assert that white people repress their feelings of guilt toward blacks by creating and sustaining the illusion that black people are inferior to whites and are not in God's grace. African Americans then seek to overturn such notions, but in order to do so they use similar thought patterns as the whites and claim that whites are, in fact, inherently bad people. Nevertheless, partly they interiorize the feeling that there is something necessarily wrong with their blackness, and they attempt to purify themselves from it by an almost obsessive adherence to religious rules. Moreover, they project their own feeling of shame and inadequacy onto those African Americans who do not accept the rules of the religious community. Although African American communities put emphasis on the experience of conversion and on a subsequent personal relationship with the deity, there is, in fact, little possibility of personal negotiation of meaning. The sermons in African American churches might have the power to make people feel emotionally more secure, but religion takes as its source the existential fear people feel and feeds this fear in order to make the believers more

obedient. What emerges as a potential solution is to transcend such a discourse, accept oneself as an individual, attempt to get hold of one's own life story and be able to define meanings for oneself. Such an approach also leads to a more respectful view of other people, be it of the same race or of other races.

The aforementioned ideas are all present in an embryonic form in Wright's work, but are made somewhat more explicit and are analyzed in more complexity in Baldwin's writings, as Baldwin seeks to give voice to different modes of facing the world by African Americans, focuses on the elements from history which have played a role in shaping the African Americans' consciousness, and puts at least as much emphasis on the inner workings of African American communities as on the influence of white society on the African Americans' situation.

2. Wright and Baldwin's confrontation

2. 1. Richard Wright

Richard Wright started writing in the late 1920's[5] and, as noted by Maurice Charney, "[his] social and moral outlook was molded by the Depression: he worked for the Federal Writers' project, he was a member of the Communist Party, and he shared in the acute social and political consciousness of the time."[6] As he describes it in his autobiographical works *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*, as a young aspiring African American writer Wright had to deal with many obstacles, mainly caused by the prevalently racist views of the white majority, but also by the limitations imposed on him by his own family and community's ideas of what is an appropriate path for a young black man.

Moreover, at the time of Wright's youth, there was very little African American literature to which a poor boy struggling to get hold of a library card could have access and from which he could draw some inspiration for his own depictions of life from an African American perspective. As noted by Jerry Bryant, "before 1940, the most familiar characters produced by black authors were innocent victims of a violent and cruel racism, or colorful exotics with a touch of the jungle in them and an attractive flair for the pleasures of life."[7] The writers Wright mentions as having influenced him most were all white: Dreiser, Masters, Mencken, Anderson, Lewis. (*BB* 283) Thus Wright needed, and wanted, to find his own way to articulate the African American experience and transpose it into text in a satisfying manner.[8] Embracing the naturalist tradition, through his writings Wright wanted to elucidate how society works and how it influences the lives and consciousness of its members. (*AH* 26)

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[5] With the exception of his very first writing steps, such as the story "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre", which he wrote at age 15, as detailed in *Black Boy.* (*BB* 182)

[6] Maurice Charney, "James Baldwin's Quarrel with Richard Wright," *American Quarterly* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963) 71. 10. Aug. 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2710268>

[7] Jerry H. Bryant, "Wright, Ellison, Baldwin--Exorcising the Demon," *Phylon* (Atlanta: Clark Atlanta University, 1976) 176. 10 Aug. 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/274770>

[8] It is noticeable that in his discussions of what molded him as an author, Wright does not even mention the work of African American authors such as Toomer, Hurston or Hughes. A potential explanation can be found in Bryant's comment that "[Wright] gave tongue to the beginnings of what we now call, among other things, the black freedom movement. (...) The writers of the Harlem Renaissance had made a similar move in the 1920's, celebrating the beauty and spontaneity of blackness, its natural grace and artistry. But the bohemian streak in those writers tended to isolate them from the black masses." (Bryant, 179) In an essay on the place of Wright within the African American tradition, Robert Stepto labels him as occupying the "large space set aside for confused men." (Stepto 529)

Wright's first successful piece of writing was a collection of short stories called *Uncle Tom's Children*. However, after witnessing how his work was received by the public, he came to the conclusion that he "had made an awfully naïve mistake." (*HBWB* xxvii) His book was perhaps too easily digestible, "a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about." (*HBWB* xxvii) Thus Wright made the decision to write uncompromising books, which would give the reader no sentimental comfort: "I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest." (*HBWB* xxvii) Then he wrote *Native Son*.

2.2. James Baldwin

James Baldwin was sixteen years younger than Richard Wright. As he recounts in his essay "Alas, Poor Richard!", written after Wright's death in 1960, as a young man Baldwin very much admired the already successful and established Wright and considered *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* the most articulate expressions of African American experience he had come across. At the age of twenty he visited Wright in his New York apartment, and had Wright promise he would have a look at the first draft of the novel Baldwin was working on. Wright liked Baldwin's work, and helped the young author get a writing fellowship. (*APR* 609-10) However, after a few more brief encounters, described in "Alas, Poor Richard!", Baldwin made an unexpected move to distance himself from his hero by publishing an essay entitled "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), which included several negative remarks about Wright's *Native Son*. Later, Baldwin expanded his criticism of Wright's writings and attitude toward the situation of black people in American society in several other essays, most notably in "Many Thousands Gone" (1955) and "Alas, Poor Richard!"

2.2.1. "Everybody's Protest Novel"

In "Everybody's Protest Novel" Baldwin first strongly criticizes Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. What he argues is that the authors of similar novels wrongly confuse literature and sociology and create characters which do not function as representations of complex human beings. As a consequence, their black characters work solely as sterile stereotypes. Moreover, Baldwin claims that these writings only falsely

reassure their readers by making them feel at once good about themselves for being aware of the dark aspects of society and for being safely removed from such evils. Later in the essay, Baldwin proceeds to state that Wright merely created an inversion of black characters such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's, but that his characters are equally distorted reflections of reality and are no more credible as human beings. According to Baldwin,

> the failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being (...) in its insistence that it is categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended," the greatest problem of Bigger as a character being that "he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity. (...) But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult - that is, to accept it." (*EPN* 23)

2.2.2. "Many Thousands Gone"

Similar issues are raised by Baldwin in his later essay "Many Thousands Gone". Baldwin further reinforces his point that to deal with men only from a social perspective puts serious limitations on the work of any artist, especially on one such as Wright, who became, according to Baldwin, victim of the illusion that he could represent all of the black people in America. Moreover, Baldwin attacks as constraining and artificial Wright's assumption that the condition of the black man in America is the same as that of all workers around the world. Bigger, a character "without the consciousness of a human being, and therefore without any complexity or dimension,"[9] fails not only as the depiction of a real individual, but also as a social symbol, for as we follow his story, we learn close to nothing "about the social dynamic which we are to believe created him." (*MTG* 27) Baldwin then states that a much richer view of said dynamic, of "the ways in which Negroes are controlled in our society and the complex techniques they have evolved for their survival" (*MTG* 27) could theoretically be derived from the depiction of the secondary characters in *Native Son*, of Bigger's family members, his friends, and his girlfriend Bessie. However, the reader is limited by getting access to the story only through the filter of Bigger's experience, i.e. through a character completely alienated from the rest of his community. As Charney points out, "in this respect *Native Son* is a failure even as a social novel, for it gives the impression that the Negro has no real society and tradition about which one can write."[10] Such a notion of a lack of an African American tradition is misleading in Baldwin's eyes, as "the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but

[9] Charney 71.
[10] Charney 71.

that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate." (*MTG* 27)

According to Baldwin, what Wright has achieved is to fully put into words for the first time "that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro: that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash." (*MTG* 26) However, the image of this mythical black man, embodied by Bigger, serves only as a way to contain the fear of white Americans by transposing all of the vague threat and indefinable uneasiness whites feel while confronted with actual black people into one clearly defined, monstrous figure. It may thus be argued that by creating Bigger, Wright was accepting and reinforcing the white discourse. On the other hand, a way out of such an impasse may lie in composing novels "in which *the* Negro would be dissolved as a social phantom of hatred-and-condescension, and instead a variety of Negroes, in all their particularity and complexity, would be imagined."[11]

In their assessment of the validity of Baldwin's criticism, critics have pointed out that the existence of Bigger as a character may have had a more beneficial outcome for the future representation of African American characters than Baldwin is willing to admit. As Bryant puts it:

> This is not a reinforcement of the image, though. It is an exorcism of it. In the figure of Bigger [Wright] condenses all that repels both the blacks and the whites in the black stereotype. Through Bigger he brings what was dark and frightening into the light, making it possible for all to address it through a higher consciousness rather than instincts we rationalize in our prejudices. This is what is supposed to happen in psychoanalysis.[12]

2.2.3. "Alas, Poor Richard!"

In "Alas, Poor Richard!" Baldwin states that in his opinion, Wright had no idea of how a society actually works. Baldwin also thought that Wright failed to explore the roots of the aggressive behavior of his characters and that the violence in his books is thus "gratuitous and compulsive." (*APR* 606-8) Baldwin believes that the African Americans' violent hatred of white people was a consequence of them having internalized the concept that they are somehow inferior to whites. This in Baldwin's view applies also directly to Wright, who "did

[11] Irving Howe, "James Baldwin: At Ease in Apocalypse," *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 97.
[12] Bryant 177.

not want to know that his impulse toward American Negroes, individually, was to despise them." (*APR* 619) According to Baldwin, such aggressive impulses springing from one's unacknowledged self-hatred are perfectly natural, and are not only common to African Americans, but form part of the human plight in general. This is seen by Baldwin as a paradox which Wright fails to understand and accept. As pointed out by Charney, "the truth of the matter is that [Bigger] kills because of his own fierce bitterness at having been born a Negro," and thus he does not become a "Christlike martyr for the Negro race which he can redeem ritually by his act of murder."[13]

However, Baldwin's idea that the plight of the African American is tied with that of the entire human race had also been formulated by Wright. As explained by Charles T. Davis, "Wright was developing the theory that the life of the American black provided a useful way of looking at the problems of America as a whole and that the American black, a creature of two cultures, was uniquely equipped as a marginal man to undertake such an investigation."[14] In *American Hunger*,[15] Wright states the following: "I felt that the Negro could not live a full, human life under the conditions imposed upon him by America; and I felt, too, that America, for different reasons, could not live a full, human life. It seemed to me, then, that if the Negro solved his problem, he would be solving infinitely more than his problem alone." (*AH* 41) Nevertheless, it remains arguable whether such an approach is discernible in his fictional writing as well as in his theoretical reflections.

2.2.4. Outcomes

Apparently, Wright took Baldwin's words as a personal offence and felt betrayed by his young colleague. According to Baldwin's side of the story,[16] over the years they engaged in numerous private discussions, but always ended up turning in circles, and never got fully reconciled. During these debates, Baldwin was trying to prove his assertions to Wright as worthy of acknowledgement, but Wright kept dismissing Baldwin's words as "art-for-art's-sake crap".[17] (*APR* 612) Even though they were trying to attain similar goals in their writing,

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[13] Charney 71.
[14] Charles T. Davis, "Richard Wright: The Artist as Public Figure," *Black Is the Color of the Cosmos; Essays on Afro-American Literature and Culture*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982) 273.
[15] Although written in 1944, *American Hunger* remained unpublished until 1977, so Baldwin had not had the opportunity to read it at the time when he was criticizing Wright.
[16] Wright did not publish his own account of their quarrels.
[17] It is noteworthy that similar criticism as Baldwin's was also advanced by Ralph Ellison in "The World and the Jug". (Ellison 22-26)

they were not able to reach an agreement concerning the means to employ. Nonetheless, Baldwin never lost his respect for Wright. For Baldwin, building upon Wright's work and even opposing it was an honor attributed to Wright:

> I had used his work as a kind of springboard into my own. His work was a road-block in my road, the sphinx, really, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself. I thought confusedly then, and feel very definitely now, that it was the greatest tribute I could have paid him. (*APR* 612)

Having a notoriously problematic relationship with his own adoptive father, Baldwin saw in Wright his "spiritual father," (*APR* 613) against whom he needed to rebel in order to give a clear shape to his own identity,[18] while at the same time hoping for an ultimate sense of mutual understanding. In connection with Baldwin seeing Wright as a father figure, an interesting point has been made by Robert A. Bone. Commenting on the fact that after Wright's death Baldwin's writing became significantly more politically engaged, Bone claims that during Wright's lifetime, Baldwin was essentially limited by defining himself in opposition to his spiritual father. As a consequence, "so long as Wright remained alive, the prophetic strain in Baldwin was suppressed. But with Wright's death in 1960, Baldwin was free to *become* his father,"[19] and take a significant step toward protest writing.

In sum, several major themes emerge from Baldwin's confrontation with Wright's work. Baldwin raises the question of whether a mere inversion might help overcome the white racial discourse, as well as that of the possibility that African American writers might indirectly and unintentionally be reinforcing racist views. Another issue that occurs to Baldwin is whether it would not be better to stress what is universally human about a character, instead of seeing black people always in relation to their race. Baldwin acknowledges the need to explore the complexity of individual human beings, with less emphasis on social factors. At the same time, he suggests that when a black writer does incorporate his characters into a social framework, he should attempt to vividly depict the African American culture and tradition, rather than always stress how African Americans are conditioned by white society. All of the aforementioned issues are relevant to the ways in which an image of religion is constructed in Wright's and Baldwin's works, which will be the focus of the next sections.

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[18] Charney 70.

[19] Robert A. Bone, "James Baldwin," *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays,* ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 31.

3. Race and religion in America

3.1. Historical Context

In order to understand how white religious discourse has influenced the perception of religion by African Americans, it is helpful to consider the historical context in which black people in America adopted the Christian religion. Already at the time when black slaves first started being shipped from Africa to America, the issue of their religion, and of whether or not they should be Christianized, arose. As explained by Albert Raboteau in his work *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, at first the fact that by being brought to America, Africans had a greater chance of becoming proper Christians was used to justify slavery. According to the dominant white discourse of that time, being a slave was a small price to pay for the salvation of one's soul. Bringing religion to "heathens" was seen as the duty of white Christians, and the African slaves were expected in return to feel grateful and remain obedient toward their masters.[20]

However, in the seventeenth century a controversy arose around the Christianization of black slaves, as a large number of slave owners feared that would their slaves become Christians, they would gain the status of human beings equal in their rights to whites, and would thus have to be freed. That would have lead to the white majority gradually losing its social, economic and political privileges over people of African descent. Eventually laws were passed which guaranteed that slaves were to remain the property of their owners for life, regardless of their religion.[21] Further reasons given by white slave owners against the idea of a universal Christianization of black slaves were of an economic nature. Religious education was seen as too time consuming for black slaves, and it was thought religion would distract slaves from their work.[22] In addition to that, the belief that the more religiously instructed black slaves were, the more rebellious a spirit they would develop, was widespread among whites, as pointed out, among others, by William Montgomery in *Under Their Own Vine and*

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[20] Albert Raboteau, *Slave religion: the "invisible institution" in the antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 97-8.
[21] Raboteau 99. See also William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994) 6.
[22] Raboteau 99.

Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South.[23] Similar fears were reignited later, in 1831, after the African American preacher Nat Turner led a rebellion of black slaves which caused several dozen deaths of white people and about a hundred deaths of black slaves.[24]

Near the end of the seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth century, the government along with white churches took the Christianization of the black population, including the black slaves, in their own hands, often to the dismay of slave owners. By the end of the eighteenth century, a large portion of the African American population was Christianized. At that time, churches and church services were mostly interracial.[25] As noted by Montgomery, African Americans mostly did not respond particularly positively to New England Puritanism, but felt the appeal of the Methodist, Presbyterian and later Baptist churches.[26] In *Struggles Over the Word: Race and Religion in O'Connor, Faulkner, Hurston and Wright*, Timothy Paul Caron explains that although the various Protestant denominations differed in some points, their teachings were in reality relatively uniform, with most distinctions between them being drawn along class lines.[27]

As Caron further explains, due to the individualistic nature of Protestant teachings the lessons people heard in church were mainly linked to personal religious experience and practice, rather than to social questions, and the emphasis was "certainly not [on] racial injustice."[28] As the antagonism between North and South grew before the Civil War, "the white church increasingly sought to justify slavery on biblical grounds."[29] At one point some of the most important denominations split into Northern and Southern factions over the issue of slaves, and from that point on, the Southern churches were free to support slavery. On top of emphasizing that slavery as an institution was legitimate in the eyes of God, sermons were used to keep the slaves obedient by stressing the importance of duty and submission on the path to salvation. White Christians in the South based their arguments upon several mentions of slavery in the Bible, as well as on the fact that it was not explicitly forbidden in the

[23] Montgomery 5.
[24] Timothy Paul Caron, *Struggles Over the Word: Race and Religion in O'Connor, Faulkner, Hurston and Wright* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000) 12.
[25] Montgomery 5-7.
[26] Montgomery 6-7.
[27] Caron 10-15. According to Caron, this uniformity was due to a "common ideology" which stemmed from the dominant role attributed to the Bible, and from the "incredibly popular revivals and camp-meetings, which were extremely inter-denominational and interracial during the Great Revival." Moreover, the churches suffered from a general lack of preachers, and people often had to attend sermons in different churches or ministers had to preach in churches of various denominations. (Caron 11)
[28] Caron 11.
[29] Caron 12.

Scripture. Their arguments were the following: "The ancient Israelites possessed slaves; Jesus makes no pronouncements against slavery in the New Testament; Paul and other New Testament writers admonish slaves to obey their masters."[30] Similar arguments were later used to defend segregation after the slaves were emancipated. White racists claimed that they were only respecting the law, which was Jim Crow, and protecting the order of their society. They also used similar arguments to justify their interracial violence and lynchings. Moreover, they sought to control the religious practices of the slaves in various ways, for instance by overseeing black religious meetings or even by forbidding the slaves from attending religious gatherings led by black preachers.[31]

As explained by Montgomery, some denominations, for instance the Baptists, allowed black people to preach in their churches. The Methodists and the Presbyterians were more reluctant to such an idea, and claimed that black men lacked the education a preacher should have. However, black preachers slowly became more numerous, and moreover, from the end of the eighteenth century onwards independent black churches began to get established.[32] African American congregations were mainly tolerated by the white population, but before the Civil War the Southern ones started being perceived as a threat and got more and more under the control of white people. In parallel to the black churches, African American people also still had the option to attend mixed-race religious gatherings. However, in these a strict segregation was kept, especially in the South, and the sermons tended to emphasize the duties and obligations of slaves toward their masters, as opposed to focusing on their spiritual lives. This was perceived as highly unsatisfactory by a large number of African Americans.[33]

In *Slave Religion*, Raboteau explains how the dissatisfaction of African Americans with practices in mixed-race churches, combined with the limitations imposed upon black religious gatherings, led the black slaves to found a multitude of "invisible," secret churches, whose members gathered in so-called "hush places," i.e. places hidden from the eyes of their masters, where they could meet unbeknownst to anybody. Thus in parallel to their official churchgoing, the slaves also worshipped God in secret, which allowed them to give voice to

[30] Caron 12, paraphrasing Wood (Wood, Forrest G. *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991. 38-111.)
[31] Caron 12.
[32] Montgomery 5-8.
[33] Montgomery 27-32.

issues they would not be able to raise in front of white people.[34] In sum, as explained by Montgomery, over the times a number of concurrent types of churches emerged. There were the mixed-race congregations, plagued by heavy discrimination, as well as conventional black churches, freer in the North and under more supervision in the South. Finally, there also existed secret churches. After the Civil War, some initiatives in favor of all these types of churches merging took place, but it only happened marginally, and overall the variety of styles of worship was preserved.[35]

Caron explains how the fact that the church was mostly Protestant influenced the ways in which the Christian faith was adopted and adapted by the African Americans. In itself, the white discourse connected with religion would not have been particularly attractive to African Americans. They could have rejected it as too constraining, and attempted to build themselves an identity by defining themselves in opposition to Christians. However, as explained by Caron, the fact that American churches, and especially the Southern Protestant ones, put a lot of emphasis on the Prime Imperative of a personal close reading of the Bible and an individual relationship to God, the black Christians felt entitled to interpret the Bible according to their own perception of the world.[36]

To many African Americans, the Bible became "a document of liberation," and as Daniel Fountain claims, "those [African Americans] who did accept Christianity likely did so because of the Christian core's demonstrated faith in the coming of freedom and salvation."[37] Similarly, Caron explains that to African Americans the Bible offered a way to cope with life, to "make a way out of no way."[38] Their interpretation of the biblical message differed radically from that of the white oppressors. To African Americans, the Bible promised deliverance from their bondage; it filled them with hope that things would inevitably change one day, and they would not only have access to Heaven, but would also get freed while still on Earth. Their belief drew strongly from the story of Moses and the deliverance from Egypt, as well as from other biblical stories which emphasize people's rights to freedom and respect.[39] As explained by Montgomery, African American Christians often came to the

[34] Raboteau 212-213.
[35] Montgomery 36-37.
[36] Caron 11-16.
[37] Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery, Civil War, and salvation: African American slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010) 5.
[38] Caron 15.
[39] Caron 15-17.

conclusion that "they were better Christians than whites," which led them to believe they had a right to aspire to a life which would be independent from that of white people.[40] However, religion mostly did not inspire them to rebel against the whites by employing aggressive means:

> The church had never been in the forefront of militant radicalism, even during slavery. The Gospel of Deliverance that filled the slaves' church had been more subversive than confrontational. Its greatest contribution to antislavery resistance had been to instill in Christian slaves a faith in providential justice, which had encouraged them to resist the system by outlasting it.[41]

After the Civil War, African American churches continued to be a social institution more than a political force. The idea was to accommodate to the white mainstream way of life in America, to adapt to the new conditions, fit into society and expect to be accepted accordingly, instead of trying to fight discrimination with violence. This doctrine was developed for instance by Booker T. Washington.[42]

3.2. Race and religion in Wright's work

Although the previously mentioned elements are not all explicitly discussed in Wright's and Baldwin's work, they nevertheless have an influence on the ways in which their characters perceive religion. In his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born", which now constitutes a sort of appendix to *Native Son*, Wright states that:

> In Dixie there are two worlds, the white world and the black world, and they are physically separated. There are white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white businesses and black businesses, white graveyards and black graveyards, and, for all I know, a white God and a black God... (xi)

Thus even on the most profoundly human plane, that of spiritual life, Wright does not acknowledge the possibility of a meaningful interaction between black people and white people. As Wright goes on to explain, one of the strategies used by African Americans to

[40] Montgomery 340.
[41] Montgomery 336-337.
[42] Apart from basing their interpretations of the Bible on their experience in American society, African Americans also partly inherited the traditions of their ancestors, not as relics, but rather as elements that were transformed and assimilated into the new religion, giving way to a certain syncretism: "African styles of worship, forms of ritual, systems of belief, and fundamental perspectives have remained vital on this side of the Atlantic, not because they were preserved in a "pure" orthodoxy but because they were transformed." (Raboteau 4) These elements include for instance the practice of shouting and dancing during church meetings. (Montgomery 26) Moreover, Fountain points out that not nearly all African Americans converted to Christianity, for instance there has for instance always been a black Muslim minority in America. (Fountain 10)

carry on living under the oppression they are facing is to turn toward their God, accept the promise of an afterlife in which race would lose any kind of significance, and believe that "Jesus would redeem the void of living, (...) that the more bitter life was in the present the happier it would be in the hereafter" (*HBWB* xiii) and for the moment adopt an attitude of "otherworldly submission." (*HBWB* xi) In *Black Boy*, Wright's statements about the absolute segregation between the white world and the black world seems to get confirmed, especially on the religious plane, where none of the deeply religious members of the narrator's family ever mentions white people with regards to religion. Religious life thus seems to extend in their minds only to the black community.

However, as Wright claims, there is a large portion of African Americans who have lost touch with the "religion or the folk culture of [their] own people," (*HBWB* xxiv) who are unsatisfied with the state of things in the black community, but unable to get closer to the white lifestyle. These people are then "hovering unwanted between two worlds." (*HBWB* xxiv) The narrator of *Black Boy*, as will be discussed later, is an example of an African American who feels removed both from the black and the white society and is unwilling to join his family's strictly religious African American community.

In *Native Son*, the feeling that the white world and the black world are completely separate even in the spiritual realm is reinforced when religion is simultaneously used by white people to distance themselves from Bigger, condemn him as subhuman, and to make him emotionally surrender and accept their worldview. The white servant at the Daltons immediately establishes her employees as "Christian people [who] believe in everybody working hard, and living a clean life." (*NS* 57) One of the implications of the Daltons' worldview as white Christians is their paternalistic, condescending attitude toward African Americans, and their assumption that they know best what is good for a poor young black man.[43] Such an attitude is certainly more positive than the antagonistic approach of other white Christians, but it remains nonetheless debilitating.

When Bigger is finally captured after his murders and is visited in prison by his mother's priest, he is tempted to accept some consolation from the church and keeps the cross the priest gives him around his neck. However, Bigger's softening to religion dramatically

[43] For instance, when Bigger states that he is not interested in getting an education, Mrs. Dalton dismisses his remark without any consideration. (*NS* 62)

turns against him as he is dragged to court and sees the flaming cross of the Ku-Klux-Klan. At first, he fails to grasp its meaning and believes that perhaps the white people outside the court want him to believe in God. However, he soon understands and feels profoundly betrayed as he thinks about the disparity between the priest's promises and reality.[44] At this point, the cross around his neck becomes in his mind a weapon against him, which he needs to throw away. Bigger then decides never to accept any more crosses "that might turn to fire while still on his chest." (*NS* 315) With this rejection, he also turns against the black priest. Thus, the white discourse takes over Bigger's views of what religion could do for him. Later on, when in court, Bigger's feeling that the cross might be a weapon to be used against him is substantiated as the prosecutor builds his case against Bigger by systematically appealing to the Christian sensibility of the jury, using phrases such as "infernal monster (...) confronted with the Christian kindness of a man he had never seen!" and refuting Max's defense of Bigger by stating that "[i]t is a wonder that God in Heaven did not drown out his lying voice with a thunderous 'NO!'"[45] (*NS* 373-74)

3.3. Baldwin's view

Even more explicitly than Wright, Baldwin comments on the Christian experience from the point of view of racial power struggles between whites and blacks, and tries to analyze the roots of the current situation. Baldwin points out that throughout history white Christians used religion to gain power over various populations in different parts of the world, establishing a dichotomy between what they considered a good, white Christian God, and a bad, black God Allah, "on the dark side of Heaven." (*FNT* 46) According to Baldwin, white Christians have systematically been using religion to justify their will to dominate over the world, religion becoming for them an "absolutely indispensable justification for the planting of the flag." (*FNT* 45) Building upon their sense of moral superiority, white Christians used the pretext of having an obligation to convert non-Christians to be able to enslave entire

[44] He was expecting "a cross bloody, not flaming; meek, not militant" which would make him feel "awe and wonder, not fear and panic" make him "want to kneel and cry, not curse and kill" (*NS* 315)

[45] In the words of the prosecutor, Bigger becomes a "maddened ape," "subhuman killer," "treacherous beast." Moreover, the prosecutor likes to conclude his statements with exalted exclamations such as "O suffering Christ, there are no words to tell of a deed so black and awful!" (*NS* 373-76)

populations. However, their alleged concern for these people's souls did not prevent them from physically and mentally abusing people who were not fellow believers in numerous ways. According to Baldwin, "[n]either civilized reason nor Christian love would cause any of those people to treat you as they presumably wanted to be treated." (*FNT* 27) As a consequence, the white man's influence led to the fact that even as Baldwin was writing, "the African [was] still attempting to digest or to vomit up the Bible." (*FNT* 45)

Moreover, on the American soil white people have used religion to excuse their mistreating of black people, and to make them feel inferior. One of their strategies to achieve this end was to promote the theory that black people are the descendents of Noah's son Ham, who has been cursed. Even as a young man, Baldwin is sensitive to such a rhetoric which is trying to make him believe that he is "predestined to be a slave." (*FNT* 38) No wonder a tension emerges between his will to adhere to religion and his notion that this same religion is being unfairly used against him and all other African Americans. Another way of making the blacks feel inferior is to exploit the "Puritan-Yankee equation of virtue with well-being," and adopt the idea that "[w]hite people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks (intrinsically, that is: God decreed it so)." (*FNT* 30) Thus white people oppress the African Americans, do not allow them to get a good position in society and then claim that the fact that the blacks do so poorly is a sign of a lack of God's grace. Baldwin's view is then clearly that "those virtues preached but not practiced by the white world [are] merely another means of holding Negroes in subjection." (*FNT* 28) He has no intention of letting the whites define who he is, even if that should alienate him from religion; he is "determined (...) to go to Hell before I would let any white man spit on me." (*FNT* 29) Altogether Baldwin thinks that if America, and the Western world in general, is to evolve in a positive direction, it will have to acknowledge the many ways in which it has used religion to justify its own ends, "release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long." According to Baldwin, white Christians need to realize that they adopted a religion which was born in the Middle East "before colour was invented," (*FNT* 45) and start acting accordingly.

Nevertheless, much of the white discourse has been internalized by the African Americans, and Baldwin even states that one of the reasons his father adhered so strongly to religion was because "at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said

about him," (*FNT* 13) and that he tried to use religion as a way to exorcise his allegedly naturally negative tendencies. Even in his most profoundly religious moment, as Baldwin is converting to religion, deep down he senses that "God (...) is white." (*FNT* 34) That prevents him from fully feeling secure and self-confident, which was the main reason that motivated him to embrace religion. However, Baldwin also makes it clear that when African Americans do manage to overcome their feeling of inferiority toward white people, they actually use very similar strategies to adapt the Bible to their own needs and to their own discourse concerning people of other races. On the example of his father, who was appalled when he found out his son had a Jewish friend, (*FNT* 38) Baldwin shows the disdain of black Christians toward Jews, a phenomenon already noted by Wright in *Black Boy*.[46] Instead of a sense of solidarity with another oppressed minority, African Americans, in Baldwin's and Wright's eyes, seem to rejoice to have someone to look down on. Moreover, many African Americans seem to fail − like white people do − at understanding the essential Christian message of love and tolerance. This is something Baldwin realized in his childhood, when he found out that the invitation to love all people is, in his community's views, supposed to apply only to other black Christians, and exclude non-blacks and non-Christians alike. (*FNT* 41) On top of that, instead of finding a way to transcend the limitations of the white Christian explanation of the origin of different races, the African Americans merely invert it, seeing the whites as the "descendents of Cain." (*FNT* 41) An even more extreme inversion occurs with the teachings of the Nation of Islam, which claims that God is in fact black, and initially all people on Earth were "Original Blacks." By coming up with a story about how white people came into existence as the result of an experiment led by a mad scientist called Yacub, their leader Elijah Muhammad sought to justify his claims that "all white people are cursed, and are devils, and are about to be brought down."[47] (*FNT* 48)

At the beginning of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, John Grimes, similarly to Bigger Thomas, is caught in between the black and the white worlds. In his mind, the prospects a life within the African American community offers him are rather grim, associated with darkness and dirt. Although the adults of his community view him as predestined to become "a preacher (...) just like his father" (*Mountain* 11) and a "Great Leader of His People,"

[46] "To hold an attitude of antagonism or distrust toward Jews was bred in us from childhood; it was not merely racial prejudice, it was a part of our cultural heritage." (*BB* 71)

[47] According to Cleaver, this story offers a variation on the "racial death wish" of the many African Americans who prefer to mate only with lighter people in order to have light-skinned offspring. (Eldridge Cleaver. "Notes on a Native Son." *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays.* Ed. Keneth Kinnamon. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 69.

(*Mountain* 21) he values praise from white people much more, since "colored people (...) could not, John felt, in any case really know." (*Mountain* 21) Feeling that he has the capacity to get recognition from white people, John is attracted to the possibilities an integration into the white world could offer him in terms of personal development. However, as noted by Georges Kent, the white world is perceived as hostile by the elders of John's community.[48] The vision of life his family members and other African American adults present him is one where aspiring to get closer to the white world seems to be equally dangerous to not joining the black religious community, which practically implies automatic eternal damnation.

Nevertheless, as the narrative goes on, the reader is shown that the adults in John's family have a much more ambiguous relation to the white world than they would like to let John think. As hinted at in the parts of the story which are dedicated to what is called their "prayers," passages which offer the reader an insight into the intimate thoughts and recollections of these characters, in fact they feel stigmatized by belonging to the black race. As explained by Davis, John's spiritual transformation and his decision to embrace religion requires "a reconciliation of some sort with the black heritage, family and folk, in America."[49] The question of whether or not this reconciliation is successful remains open.

Through the recollections of the elders, the reader gets acquainted with Gabriel and Florence's mother's interpretation of the emancipation of African Americans from slavery as the fulfillment of the promise she saw in the biblical story of God bringing the Jews out of Egypt. She adhered to the idea that African Americans are God's new Chosen People, which will get His ultimate recognition. However, another myth seems to haunt the main characters throughout the novel, namely that of how Ham was cursed by his father Noah. As has been mentioned before, this story gets connected with the idea that black people are the descendents of Ham, cursed forever. That notion seems to feed the characters' sense of inferiority.

Florence and Gabriel are characters who seem to externally embrace the vision that black people have nothing to be ashamed of, but internally show signs of never having overcome a racial feeling of inferiority. Florence, inspired by her mother's story of

[48] George E. Kent, "Baldwin and the Problem of Being," *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays,* ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 19.

[49] Davis, Modern Black Novel 325.

deliverance from slavery, transforms it into her own dream of being one day able to leave the place where she was raised, and to lead a better life, far from the practices of "common niggers". (*Mountain* 75) To be more like a white person, she uses bleaching cream and has plans of becoming rich. Her marriage to Frank fails because he does not feel the urge to escape from the black community and Florence despises him for that. As expressed by Bone: "All of [Florence's] deeper feelings have been sacrificed to a futile striving for "whiteness" and respectability."[50] Her life ends up in frustration as she is torn between the need to repent and an urge to "call God into account" (*Mountain* 102) for not having kept his promise of deliverance.

As noted by Kent, "Florence is one of a long line of Baldwin's characters who have absorbed from the dominant culture the concept of blackness as low, contemptible, evil."[51] Such a view is reinforced by the white versus black imagery the Christian rhetoric is so full of. Bone explains that as children African Americans realize they are being looked down on by other people. While they are wondering what is the matter with them, they feel a profound sense of shame and, in Bone's words, "[o]ne can readily understand how such a sense of personal shame might have been inflamed by contact with the Christian tradition and transformed into an obsession with original sin."[52] Consequently, excerpts from the Scripture such as "I am a man of unclean lips" take on a special significance for African Americans. Bone further explains:

> The Negro's religious ritual, as Baldwin points out in an early essay, is permeated with color symbolism. (...) If he accepts the white man's equation of blackness with evil, he is lost. Hating his true self, he will undertake the construction of a counter-self along the line that everything black he now disowns. To such a man, Christ is a kind of spiritual bleaching cream.[53]

The internalization of racism by black characters and the ways in which they reenact old patterns of behavior instead of breaking the cycle and finding an alternative mode of adjustment to the reality of racial conflicts is also shown on the relationship between John and Gabriel. Although Gabriel maintains to John that "all white people [are] wicked, and that God [is] going to bring them low," (*Mountain* 40) his attitude in fact seems to copy the white man's model of behavior, as explained by Fabre: "[The story] is articulated out of numerous

[50] Bone 33.
[51] Kent 19.
[52] Bone 36.
[53] Bone 36.

Biblical tales, and through the expedient of the Bible it becomes a metaphor of race relations in the United States. (...) Explicit allusions connect John's condition to that of the American black in general."[54] Through the association of John with the figure of Ham and Gabriel with that of Noah, as well as given the fact that John is a natural son and Gabriel a father who has rejected his illegitimate child, their relationship becomes metaphorically that of "the black son in relation to the white father."[55]

This becomes symbolical within the context of American history: "the American black's history (...) makes him the natural son of the American white, a son disavowed by his father."[56] Similarly to the white man, Gabriel is unable to face his sins, his faults in dealing with people over which he has power. Instead of admitting his failures at least to himself, "he conceals his transgression so as not to tarnish his image as the leader Chosen by the Lord to propagate the race of the elect, (...) he keeps his wickedness at a distance and repudiates it by attributing it to others."[57] Taking advantage of the fact that as a preacher he can build upon his aura of alleged moral authority, he puts a great effort into making John feel flawed, inferior, unworthy of his father's attention. In the process, Gabriel manages to convince himself that such a view is right. That, according to Fabre, is a mere reproduction of the mechanisms used by white people to escape from their sense of guilt toward racial minorities. The white man "transforms the black man into a 'Devil's son', into an incarnation of evil identified by his color, stigmatized and branded by all the Biblical symbolism."[58] That allows him to feel by definition morally superior to African Americans, and effectively suppress any memory of the injustice he has perpetrated. Similar remarks about the dynamics of John and Gabriel's relationship are articulated by Bone, who states the following: "The substance of [Gabriel's] life is moral evasion. (...) In disowning the bastard, he disowns the 'blackness' in himself. Gabriel's psychological mechanisms are, so to say, white."[59] John's reactions when facing psychological oppression and his eventual adoption of religion mirror the attitude of those African Americans who rely on the Bible to console themselves with a narrative which

[54] Michel Fabre, "Fathers and Sons in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 129.
[55] Fabre 129.
[56] Fabre 129.
[57] Fabre 130.
[58] Fabre 129-131.
[59] Bone 36.

promises them justice, or, as Fabre puts it, use "religion as a survival tactic" by developing a "dream of a revenge by proxy, of a revenge without that violence which religion condemns."[60]

In sum, both Wright and Baldwin put a strong emphasis on the segregation between white and black people, as well as on the ways white religious discourse is used in order to create a sense that black people are inferior. In more detail than Wright, Baldwin depicts how various historical factors and mythical stories have influenced the mental processes of his characters on a conscious as well as on an unconscious level. By multiplying the perspectives through which his novel is narrated, he is able to build a greater sense of the complexity of human life.

[60] Fabre 131.

4. Religion within the African American community

As discussed in the previous section, the African Americans' self-perception has been greatly influenced by the religious discourse of the white majority. The black community has partly defined itself in opposition to white people, by reversing their religious assumptions, and uniting "to protect themselves (...) and to preserve their self-esteem."[61] In addition to such an attitude, however, the white discourse has been internalized by the black community, giving rise to numerous tensions between the African Americans themselves, who, as expressed by Baldwin, tend to "mainly look down or look up but do not look at each other." (*FNT* 33) Moreover, it creates personal inner tensions within black people as individuals who have to struggle to embrace their blackness and not to see it as a hindrance to a satisfying spiritual life. Their need to assert their value may take different courses. Either they can try to assimilate and embrace white values and a white lifestyle, and attempt to mingle with white people, or they can wish to unite against the oppression of whites and stand up to them. In either case, they put themselves under a lot of pressure to "wash" themselves from sin, to join the community of the "saints" and get as far from "sinners" as possible. All of these issues are reflected in Wright's and Baldwin's works in the ways religion is perceived within the black community, starting with the smallest social unit, the family.

4.1. Religion in the family

Throughout *Black Boy*, religion is discussed mainly in connection with the ever-persisting attempts of Richard's family at persuading him to embrace faith. Richard's family is characterized by the absence of any stable male figure; the father has deserted his family, Richard's grandfather seems paralyzed by the past and never takes on a prominent role in Richard's life, and his uncles appear and disappear without any significant influence on Richard. Thus it remains the task of women, specifically of Richard's mother, his grandmother, and to a certain extent his aunt Addie, to keep the family together. These women all use religion as an essential tool to cope with the demands of life. With no partners to rely on, they turn to God and the preachers of their respective churches for a sense of security and meaningful existence. According to Qiana Whitted, they do so because such a dependency on male, paternalistic figures allows them the comfort to "deliberately stop

[61] John Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977) quoted in Fountain 2.

think[ing]."[62] However, it may be argued that their attitude toward religion is not simply one of passive submission, and that they also use religion consciously as a means of enlarging the scope of their influence over other people.

As Richard's narrative unfurls, it becomes clear that his mother and grandmother do not represent a united front. Their attachment to religion differs in degree, the grandmother having more fanatical tendencies. However, some of the ways in which they use religion to assert their power and role within the community are essentially similar. Richard's grandmother belongs to the Seventh Day Adventist Church, known for being rather conservative, interpreting the Bible literally as God's revelation, and committing to a relatively rigorous lifestyle.[63] In her home, Richard's grandmother struggles to maintain what Wright calls "a hard religious regime." (*BB* 122) She ensures that all her family members spend each day a considerable time praying, go to church, and do not break any religious rules that she sees as essential, including for instance that of eating only certain types of food. She is clearly the rule maker of the household, and she persists in insisting that her rules are in fact decreed by God. Thus for example when the children bother her by talking while eating, she reminds them that it is sinful. (*BB* 155) She is also very strict when it comes to her church's rule of not working on Saturdays, which becomes one of the most important sources of conflict between her and Richard. Everything in her life is filtered through religious experience, to the extent that "Granny's informative prayers" (*BB* 152) serve as a kind of newscast for Richard, from which he finds out about various going-ons in the family which would otherwise not be discussed with him.

Everything that Richard's grandmother perceives as external to her worldview and as potentially threatening to her home's order is banished, including the non-religious literature Richard finds himself so attracted to, which she dismisses as "Devil's work." (*BB* 48) According to Wright, much of her behavior is dominated by fear. It is possible that the precarity of her situation in society, as well as the lack of freedom she is allowed, lead to a heightened feeling that breaking any sort of rules might cost her a lot. Though Richard is highly critical of his grandmother's reasoning, through her he becomes nonetheless sensitive

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[62] Quiana J. Whitted, "'Using my grandmother's life as a model': Richard Wright and the gendered politics of religious representation." *The Southern Literary Journal* 36.2 (2004) 25. *Literature Resource Center,* 11 Aug. 2012 <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA117607167&v=2.1&u=karlova&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w> quoting Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing*. (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1986) 116.

[63] Whitted 19.

to "the meaning of religion, the hunger of the human heart for that which is not and can never be, the thirst of the human spirit to conquer and transcend the implacable limitations of human life." (*BB* 132) As noted by Whitted, "her old age, as a former slave, anchors her image in spaces and times past."[64] In this way religiousness gets implicitly connected with the old social order.

Richard's mother is far less bigoted than his grandmother. Though deeply religious, she seems proud when Richard is able to overcome some of the limitations imposed by his grandmother, for instance when he persuades her to allow him to work Saturdays. She is concerned for her son's soul, but in a less dogmatic, more pragmatic way. She even goes through her own small rebellion as she turns away from her mother's church and starts going to meetings of the Methodist church. At one point she tells Richard "well, you ought to be a member of *some* church," (BB *165*) but leaves the space for him to choose which church he would like to frequent. However, similarly to her mother, she uses religious talk as a strategy to assert her power within the family. This becomes clear at the beginning of the book, when Richard defies his father by taking his angry exaggerated words literally and killing a small kitten. Trapped by Richard, the father is helpless in trying to find a way to punish his son. Richard's mother, by turning to religious discourse, figures out how to cleverly punish her son by making him scared of God's punishment. She simply asks him to repeat the following prayer after her: "Dear God, our Father, forgive me, for I knew not what I was doing (...) And spare my poor life, even though I did not spare the life of the kitten..." (*BB* 20) Similarly, when Richard's father refuses to give her money to provide for their children, she retorts: "Giving your son a nickel when he's hungry. If there's a God, He'll pay you back." (*BB* 42) The belief that God will punish those who do her wrong allows her to compensate for her lack of actual power to change things.

Both Richard's mother and his grandmother consider it essential that he accept God, as it is in line with their worldview. Richard's insubordination to God is something they cannot relate to, a chaotic element in their household. Besides the responsibility they feel for his soul, they also feel that Richard's lack of faith brings chaos into their own lives:

> My position in the household was a delicate one; I was (...) a blood relative who professed no salvation and whose soul stood in mortal peril. Granny intimated boldly, basing her logic on God's justice, that one sinful person in a household could bring down the wrath of God upon the entire establishment,

[64] Whitted 19.

> damning both the innocent and the guilty, and on more than one occasion she interpreted my mother's long illness as a result of my faithlessness. (*BB* 114)

The depiction Wright offers of his family gives ground to some of Baldwin's criticism. Even though *Black Boy* is an autobiography, Wright has decided on what to put focus, what to stress, what to omit, what value judgments to provide. Clearly, "the work offers problems of selection, organization, and language that link it closely to fiction."[65] As noted by Davis, in *Black Boy* there are extremely few mentions of Richard having any friends, of ever having had any meaningful interactions with his family members (whose names are in most cases not even provided), or with members of the wider community. Moreover, most of Richard's family members are depicted as thoroughly egotistical and as having no interest in Richard as a person. However, according to other accounts Wright made of his life experience, his father, grandmother or aunt all "seem to have possessed some redeeming qualities" and Richard's extended family always "cooperated in times of need."[66] In Davis's opinion, "[o]ne function of the omissions is to strengthen the impression in our minds of Richard's intense isolation."[67] Such an approach possibly stems from Wright's "compulsion to make symbols of his everyday experience,"[68] and is closely linked to his wider opinions about what constitutes good literature.[69] According to Davis, in order to promote his particular theories concerning African Americans, Wright presents his own life experience as universally valid, without ever offering an alternative view of what the life of a black boy similar to himself might look like.[70]

Similarly, Wright does not depict the many forms religious life can take on. As noted by Whitted, "[t]hough most black women during this time belonged to Baptist or Methodist churches--as in the case of Wright's own mother--he uses Granny's fundamentalist devotion to the Seventh-Day Adventists to encompass nearly all African American religions."[71] The

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[65] Davis, Richard Wright 279.
[66] Charles T. Davis, "From Experience to Eloquence: Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as Art," *Black Is the Color of the Cosmos; Essays on Afro-American Literature and Culture*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982) 285-286.
[67] Davis, *Black Boy* as Art 285.
[68] Davis, *Black Boy* as Art 295.
[69] "A need that I did not comprehend made me use words to created religious types, criminal types, the warped, the lost, the baffled (...) But something was missing in my imaginative efforts; my flights of imagination were too subjective, too lacking in reference to social action. I hungered for a grasp of the framework of contemporary living (...) for theories to light up the shadow of contact." (*AH*, 26)
[70] Davis, *Black Boy* as Art 283.
[71] Whitted 19.

image of religion which emerges from Wright's depiction is then necessarily biased.[72] In Wright's works the church is described from the outside as a social institution. The religious characters remain "types", and there is little effort to offer their perspective in a nuanced way. It is thus possible to argue that James Baldwin was right to criticize Wright for not creating characters complex enough to reflect all the multiple facets of a life experience.

Even though there is a world of difference between Wright's persona as narrator of *Black Boy* and between the character of Bigger in *Native Son*, there are also many similarities in the way religion is presented in these works and in the ways it affects the main heroes. In *Native Son*, again the main character has no significant father figure in his life and his single mother, struggling to raise her children on her own, finds refuge in religion. Mrs. Thomas's reliance on God is established right at the beginning of the book, when we hear her singing "Lord I want to be a Christian, in my heart, in my heart." (*NS* 37) Throughout the novel, she persists in insisting that Bigger should attempt to convert to religion. The other woman in Bigger's life, Bessie, has a tendency to look for peace of mind by drinking alcohol, but she too, in times when she feels most powerless, turns to God as witness and help. (*NS* 215)

The fact that the most religious characters in Wright's autobiographical as well as in his fictional works are female is not without its significance. As explained by Whitted, Wright understands religion as emasculating, connected with "warmth, softness, and analgesic qualities."[73] To Wright, religion is good only for people who lack personal initiative and do not value their personal freedom. On the other hand, Wright "represents creativity, self-awareness, and religious skepticism as gestures of masculine assertiveness."[74] Thus, according to Wright religion is for people who do not want to rebel against the whites, who are fine with staying submissive and constrained by rules they fail to perceive critically, which leads to a perpetuation of the historical model of white dominance.

Apparently, Baldwin had a rather different experience with the gender dynamics of religious practice within the family. The prominent characters associated with religion in his works are male, father figures. As he explains in *The Fire Next Time*, his own father was a

[72] Using his grandmother's life "as a model" for his literary representations of religion becomes particularly problematic, however, when we begin to consider the doctrinal variations of Protestant denominations and the diversity of African American churches, North and South. The nation also witnessed a growing number of black Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and smaller black sects after World War 1 and the Great Migration. (...) But Wright was not concerned with qualifying his rendering of the black folk church with these exceptions. (Whitted 20)
[73] Whitted 25.
[74] Whitted 25.

preacher, and from that experience Baldwin clearly draws in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, in which the father figure is dominant in relation to John's conversion, while the female figures, dealing with their own problems through religion, have a more laid-back attitude and put less pressure on the main protagonist. In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin remembers how religion became a sort of battleground between himself and his father. Becoming a preacher, and thus beating his father at his own game, proved to Baldwin a means of overpowering his father. (*FNT* 35) Thus adhering to the church is not entirely presented by Baldwin as emasculating, even though he also shows it as limiting, as discussed in the next chapter.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, there is the same motif of a controlling father who is a religious leader, and of a son considering whether or not to follow in his footsteps. John, deciding whether he will embrace religion, must make a parallel decision to either embrace his family or reject them. As his heart is hardened toward his father, it is by extension hardened toward God. (*Mountain* 22) Moreover, the motif of a female member of the family desperately trying to get her offspring to convert is also present here, in the person of Florence and Gabriel's mother. Her insistence is similar to that of Richard's grandmother, but her motivations are perhaps made more clear, as her story is explicitly connected to the abolition of slavery. God having kept his promise to deliver her from slavery, Gabriel's mother does not want to fail Him and meet a fate similar to that of white slave owners, as "only the whirlwind, death riding on the whirlwind, awaited those people who had forgotten God." (*Mountain* 79) As a young boy, Gabriel is "made to kneel down while his mother pray[s]." (*Mountain* 82) However, religion does not appeal to him. That suddenly changes during his adult life, when he feels disgusted by his lifestyle and decides to embrace his mother's story. As he recalls later: "Then I praised God, Who had brought me out of Egypt and set my feet on the solid rock." In certain regards, the character of John's mother echoes Richard's mother in *Black Boy*, as she represents a younger, more pragmatic generation, which is nevertheless still deeply attached to religion. Far from imposing her own vision aggressively, she tells John: "I know (...) there's a whole lot of things you don't understand. But don't you fret. The Lord'll reveal to you in His own good time everything He wants you to know." (Mountain *36*)

Furthermore, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* whole families are formed according to religious assumptions. Gabriel first decides to marry Deborah because he thinks God may have put them together for a reason, that it is his duty "to raise her up, to release her from that dishonor which was hers in the eyes of men" and that if he does so, "their married bed [will]

be holy, and their children [will] continue the line of the faithful, a royal line." (*Mountain* 124) After Deborah dies, Gabriel needs to repent because he has been unfaithful and has refused to acknowledge his illegitimate child. Thus he decides to marry Elizabeth who in his eyes has also sinned. He thinks that by this repentance he will get an heir worthy of that name: "But Roy had been begotten in the marriage bed, the bed that Paul had described as holy, and it was to him the Kingdom was promised." (*Mountain* 130) The outcomes of such decisions will be discussed later.

4.2. Religion in the community

The pressure the protagonists of Wright's and Baldwin's books face from their families becomes more understandable within the context of African American community life. The parental figures in these works are aware that in order to be accepted as members of the community, their children need to publicly embrace religion. As noted by Blassingdale, the specific culture which has developed around African American religious life helped forge a "strong sense of group solidarity"[75] within the African American communities. However, it also implies that who should wish to be able to profit from such a solidarity has to conform to certain rules. Both in Wright's and in Baldwin's work, communities work as a controlling mechanism, and religion is used to determine who as an individual is worthy of being accepted. Religion thus delimits a community within the wider African American community, a group of the "saved," as opposed to those who remain "sinners." Membership in these social units is based on a profoundly personal experience, as explained by Flint, commenting on the practices of those denominations to which most African American people have adhered: "Appeal [is] to the heart more than to the head, and conversion [is] the dominant religious experience. The quest for personal holiness which follow[s] conversion t[akes] an individual course."[76] In connection with African American religious life, Caron points out that most emphasis has been put on sin, personal salvation, redemption and "an individual, close reading and knowledge of the Scriptures after conversion."[77] However, behind the idea of an individual relationship with the deity lurks the community, which seeks to take control over the inner beliefs of its members, out of fear that a disturbing element might destabilize everybody's fragile role in society.

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[75] John Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977) quoted in Fountain 2.
[76] Wayne J. Flint, "One in the Spirit, Many in the Flesh: Southern Evangelicals," 23, quoted in Caron 10.
[77] Caron 8.

In *Black Boy* the community seems more oppressive than supportive, promoting what could be called a "with us or against us" mentality. Richard resists very long to his mother's and grandmother's attempts to get him to convert, and he strongly refuses to be insincere about religion. However, he is ultimately pressured to convert by young people of the same age, with whom he would like to become friends, but who imply that they can only be "brothers in Christ" (*BB* 168) if his soul is saved. One day at church the situation is so orchestrated as to put a maximum of pressure on the young potential converts, and finally Richard succumbs, when converting seems to be his only option not to fatally hurt his mother's feelings and become completely alienated from his community.

In *Native Son*, Bigger feels profoundly detached from his community, something he would like to change, but does not see as possible: "There were rare moments when a feeling of longing for solidarity with other black people would take hold of him (...) but [there was] too much difference between them, unity [was] possible only under the threat of death, in fear and in shame, not in hope." (*NS* 109) Bigger's mother and her priest try to make Bigger accept the idea that he must surrender completely, not only within the context of his trial, but also before God, and that only such a surrender could lead to potential redemption.

In Baldwin's work, the black community is striving to survive under the pressure of white society and trying to adopt a vision of the world in which black people could identify with the biblical story of the deliverance from Egypt. As a result, the community mostly comes to see society in rather dichotomic terms. As Baldwin remembers it, the main reason he was attracted to religion was that he was made to feel as if danger was lurking all around, as well as inside him. Baldwin explains how African American parents, whose lives are controlled by a fear of the possible consequences of a condemnation by the white society, transfer this fear onto their children, without verbalizing it. These children then feel in great danger, without being quite sure why. They are made to feel that they will most likely become criminals unless they adhere to the strict rules fashioned by the community. As explained by Bone, the impression they get is that "[b]etween God and the Devil an unrelenting contest [is] waged for the souls of the young."[78] The young people are then led to believe that "God and safety [are] synonymous," (*FNT* 23) and their fears "drive them into the church." (*FNT* 32)

[78] Bone 48.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, apart from taking a strong stance against whites, the community's elders also systematically categorize black people into "saints" and "sinners." Those who have already undergone spiritual conversion are, seemingly forever, labeled as "saints," and all those who have not are "sinners," doomed to be damned unless they convert. A sense of insecurity pervades the novel, a feeling that God and the whites are watching each of the characters' steps and anything anybody does or even thinks might be used against them. This pushes the community to take a radical stance and thoroughly reject any kind of "sin," so as not to run the risk of being accused of anything. The battle between Heaven and Hell within the community also gets projected on the individual characters, as even their bodies seem to become a physical battleground between Jesus and Satan.[79] The younger characters struggle to figure out how to gain a stable role in society, and the attitude of the elders often makes them feel inadequate. As stated by Fabre: "Through the paternal puritanism, very normal instincts appear to John to be the proof of his damnation."[80] The private space of the younger characters constantly gets invaded by the "saints," as can be observed when Elisha and his female friend Ella Mae get reprimanded in front of the entire congregation simply for spending time together and putting themselves in a situation in which they could theoretically be tempted to "sin." (*Mountain* 17)

Not all characters in the novel accept such a strict division of people into categories. For instance John's brother Roy is able to stand up to such a rhetoric: "I ain't looking to go to no *jail*. You think that all that's in the world is jails and churches? You ought to know better than that, Ma." (*Mountain* 27) Similar feelings are conveyed by other outcasts such as Esther, Richard or Frank. However, without any outside support system, these characters all die prematurely (with the exception of Roy, who only gets gravely injured), and the community seems to get the last word. As the personal wishes of the characters get connected with evil impulses, the characters have to choose between following their nature and joining the community and getting "saved." Thus John's dilemma, as expressed by Herman Beavers, consists of having to choose either "maturation and aspiration" or "salvation."[81]

[79] See for instance how John is searching for a trace of "the hand of Satan" on his face. (*Mountain* 30)
[80] Fabre 126.
[81] Herman Beavers, "Finding common ground: Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin," *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 195.

However, the forms in which the religious community influences its members are not all based on such negative manipulation. Baldwin himself admits that he witnessed at church "a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare." (*FNT* 42) The church accompanies its members on their spiritual journey, first helping them to achieve the goal of conversion in a process Baldwin likens to labor: "On this threshing-floor the child was the soul that struggled to the light, and it was the church that was in labor, that did not cease to push and pull, calling on the name of Jesus." (*Mountain* 129) After they have converted, the members of the congregation are able to benefit from the support of their church in facing the numerous challenges of their daily lives.

4.3. The African American folk sermon

As explained in the previous sections, independent African American churches were some of the prime places in which black voices could be heard. There, African Americans could express their side of the story at least within their own community. The fact that they had their own churches, separate from the whites, with their own black ministers, provided the African Americans with a much needed "sense of autonomy."[82] The black preachers were the central figures of African American communities, taking on a major role not only in the spiritual realm, but also in the social and political domains, where they had a great influence on the members of their congregations. The importance of African American preachers within their communities is stressed by Montgomery, who mentions among other sources for his claim W. E. B. Du Bois's famous statement that "the Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil,"[83] and Thomas Fortune's assertion that "[n]o class of men wield more influence, for good or evil, among Afro-Americans than the preachers."[84]

Along with the fascinating spirituals, folk sermons are arguably the most powerful expressions of African American religious life. In "Heavenly Voice of the Black American" Charles Davis claims that although spirituals have been more widely discussed in the past, the sermons of black preachers constitute a "purer," more "authentic" form of expression. The spirituals are repeated from memory, and their understanding by the members of the

[82] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1974) 238, quoted in Fountain, 2.
[83] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls Of Black Folk*, quoted in Montgomery, 307.
[84] T. Thomas Fortune, quoted in Montgomery, 307.

congregation is not necessarily particularly profound. The uniqueness of the folk sermons lies in the fact that they are constantly renewed acts of creation, in which the speaker feels that he "becomes" the voice of God, that through him God addresses the congregation, and the audience in turn gets the impression of being directly addressed by God through the preacher. As explained by Davis, the sermon "is the product of the black man's effort to assimilate and to adapt Christian ideas, an effort that folklorist Bruce Rosenberg dates as far back as the Second Great Awakening in 1800, if not before."[85]

Paraphrasing Rosenberg, who conducted an in-depth study of folk sermons and their formal features, Davis further explains that these sermons, a living genre which has not yet ceased to exist, tend to share certain formal, structural characteristics. Their most important feature is rhythm, gradation toward a climactic moment. They are prosaic at first, and a theme is established based on a familiar text or situation. As the sermon approaches its paroxysm, the phrasing and grammatical structures become more regular, and full of repetitions. Finally, the preacher uses "verbal devices of a chanted poem, characterized by a strong beat, (...) the imagery made luminous or symbolic by what the speaker takes to be providential intrusions."[86] The whole is concluded by a more concrete, easily graspable message.

Davis further stresses the fact that the role of the congregation is not passive, that its members are expected to react with formulas of their own, such as "Preach it, brother," or "Yes, Lord," echoing the "repeated formula phrases" of the preacher. Ideally a symbiosis between the preacher and the congregation is established, the audience helping to reinforce the message of the sermon by emulating the emotional pattern of what is being said and by providing the continuity that may be lacking in the logic of the narrative by stressing its rhythmical and emotional gradation.[87] Thus preacher and congregation work together to maximize the impact of the sermon. In this way, not only is the personal experience of each individual in the audience more rewarding, but together the congregation can also help those they perceive as lost souls finally to reach the point where they are able to undergo religious conversion. The exceptional evocative power of folk sermons is acknowledged both by Wright and Baldwin, with Baldwin as a former preacher of the Pentecostal church being also able to provide an account of his personal experience from behind the pulpit.

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[85] Charles T. Davis, "The Heavenly Voice of the Black American," *Black Is the Color of the Cosmos; Essays on Afro-American Literature and Culture*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982) 300.
[86] Davis, Heavenly Voice 302.
[87] Davis, Heavenly Voice 302.

In *Black Boy*, Wright describes his younger self as always having been sensitive to words and their power to provide people with a much needed escape from reality. Although he does not "feel God," (*BB* 125) he nevertheless admits that "while listening to the vivid language of the sermons [he] was pulled toward emotional belief." (*BB* 113) However, while the stories the sermons tell might be appealing emotionally and poetically, functionally they are empty, at least in Richard's eyes. Similarly, in *Native Son*, when Bigger is visited by the preacher of his mother's church, he is impressed by the priest's eloquence and touched by what his words evoke in him:

> Bigger sat still, listening and not listening. If someone had afterwards asked him to repeat the preacher's words, he would not have been able to do so. But he felt and sensed their meaning. As the preacher talked there appeared before him a vast silent void and the images of the preacher swam in that void, grew large and powerful (...) [t]hey were images which had once given him a reason for living, had explained the world. Now they sprawled before his eyes and seized his emotions in a spell of awe and wonder. (*NS* 262)

However, such images eventually fail at providing Bigger with a narrative which would correspond with his sense of reality. Both for Richard and for Bigger, religious words never work on the rational plane as well as they do on the emotional one. The objections to religious teachings present throughout Wright's works will be further discussed in the next section.

Baldwin, as a former preacher, had a much closer relationship to folk sermons than Wright. Even though he later disengaged himself completely from the church, many of his writings formally and stylistically echo the oral tradition of African American religious sermons. *The Fire Next Time* has been qualified as a "secular and apocalyptic sermon"[88] and, in Davis's words, "We are never far from the rhythm of the folk sermon throughout Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*."[89]

In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin admits that the unique atmosphere of the church has always held a peculiar power over him:

> The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this engagement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will. There is (...) no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming

[88] Keneth Kinnamon, Introduction, *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays,* ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 1.
[89] Davis, Heavenly Voice 307.

> together and crying holy unto the Lord. (...) I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church. (*FNT* 36)

Moreover, Baldwin confirms that during sermons, the preachers "work themselves into"[90] a feeling of direct divine inspiration, and acknowledges the power and help a preacher gets from the responses of his congregation:

> Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, "the Word" - when the church and I were one (....) their cries (...) sustained and whipped on my solos until we all became equal, wringing wet, singing and dancing, in anguish and rejoicing, at the foot of the altar. (*FNT* 36)

What emerges as the most important feature of Baldwin's description of church meetings is the power of the ritual to transcend the negative aspects of the believers' daily lives. By blending their "anguish and rejoicing," and, in a unique experience, making these emotions meaningful in connection to a larger mythical narrative, the sermons enable the believers to come to terms with their personal fate. As explained by Bone, the preacher "provides his flock with a series of metaphors corresponding to their deepest experience. The Church thus offers to the Negro masses a ritual enactment of their daily pain."[91] As a result, these people with "worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord," (*FNT* 36) are able to bear their lot with more ease, as they share it with their God and the other members of their congregation.

Most of the main storyline of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* takes place at church, during a prayer meeting. As the narrative progresses, the present sermon gets intertwined with sermons past, recollected, as well as with memories, inner feelings, thoughts and visions of the main characters. By exposing the readers to such a wealth of impulses, Baldwin enables them to get a feeling of what such a religious experience can mean to people. As mentioned before, the progression of the prayer meeting is likened to labor, during which all the members of the congregation who are present are helping to deliver a new soul into the spiritual world. In this process, their mutual interactions amplify the emotional impact the meeting has on each individual. The characters, "encouraged by the exhortations of the preacher, move toward some sort of ultimate illumination, in much the way the folk preacher

[90] Davis, Heavenly Voice 301.
[91] Bone 36.

struggles with the empty and misleading forms of the world to achieve a perfect statement of the Word."[92] However, the profound personal meaning each character finds in this experience is unique to each of them.

Similarly to real-life folk sermons, the structure of the novel is such that it unravels on the basis of emotional patterns, more so than logically. The various visions of the characters are intertwined with reality in such a way that it becomes at times difficult to visualize what is in fact happening in the church. In following the narrative, the reader is emotionally guided by the excerpts from spiritual songs which are scattered throughout the novel. Moreover, the congregation is smartly used, as their voices punctuate not only the sermons within the novel, but also the novel as a whole.[93] As Davis explains, the reactions of his community offer a mixture of elements that ultimately bring about John's conversion:

> These voices linger in his mind and mix with the flood of memories that involve his relationship with his stepfather, more pleasant recollections of his friend Elisha, of his mother and his aunt, and the sounds of the cosmos, from the roaring of the fires of Hell to the softer echoes of the moving feet of the saints in Heaven.[94]

Altogether the church ritual comes across in Baldwin's writings as working on a more active principle, where new meanings emerge based on each character's personal understanding and interpretation, whereas in Wright's work the overall sense the reader gets is that all the lessons to be derived from religious experience have been pre-defined by the church and by the community. For Baldwin the emotional response these religious rituals trigger in their audience can have a transformative function, in Wright's work they do not have such a power.

[92] Davis, Heavenly Voice 307.
[93] See Davis 307-311. Another clever use of sermons by Baldwin can be traced on the fact that Gabriel as a former preacher has his memories of significant events always connected in his mind with the sermons he made at the same time. As Davis explains, these sermons are used by Baldwin to shed additional light on Gabriel's life and on his important decisions. (Davis, Heavenly Voice 307-308)
[94] Davis, Heavenly Voice 310.

5. Limitations of the religious discourse and possible alternatives

5.1. Wright's and Baldwin's criticism of church practices

Although both Wright and Baldwin acknowledge that the church has a strong appeal and that its rituals help keep the community together and provide emotional relief to individual believers, a general uneasiness about religion pervades their writings. In their autobiographical works, Baldwin and Wright both explain why they have not been able to accept certain church practices and why in their eyes the church as an institution has lost, or should lose, most of its historical significance. Similar ideas are also illustrated in their fictional works.

In *Black Boy*, although Richard longs for a sense of connection with others, for recognition by the community, he steadily remains unwilling to accept his mother's and his grandmother's religious outlook on life. As a young child, he "had given a kind of uneasy assent to [God's] existence" (*BB* 104) but His existence or non-existence does not seem to matter much to Richard, which he explains to a friend, stating that he "will never feel God," (*BB* 126) but that he does not believe God would care either way. The church appeals to him only insofar as it serves as a place where he can meet his peers: "my mother would take me and my brother to Sunday school. We did not object, for church was not where we learned of God or His ways, but where we met our school friends and continued our long, rambling talks." (*BB* 93) Later, he also finds the church environment with its "sweetly sonorous hymns" (*BB* 124) sexually stimulating, and he falls in love with the church elder's wife. Although he does not mind going to church, he "remain[s] basically unaffected." (*BB* 124)

As a naturally curious child, Richard is constantly on the search for explanations of how the world works, but what he is taught at church seems to him out of touch with reality. As he explains, "as soon as I went out of the church and saw the bright sunshine and felt the throbbing life of the people in the streets I knew that none of it was true and that nothing would happen." (*BB* 113) Uncompromisingly honest from a young age, Richard simply cannot ignore the disparity between reality and what he is being taught. Fully aware that his decisions will bring him further away from his family, Richard cannot accept prefabricated stories and refuses to believe in the absence of empiric truth. He is not willing to obey, to get

in line, just because he is being threatened: "I became skilled in ignoring these cosmic threats and developed a callousness toward all metaphysical preachments." (*BB* 115)

When Richard is sent to religious school by his grandmother and his aunt, he feels transposed into a wholly different world than that of the rough streets he had been used to, one where all individuality is carefully suppressed and as a result the students' personalities lose any kind of spark. In Wright's words, the pupils were "a docile lot [who had never] caught a glimpse of what the world was, (...) their personalities [were] devoid of anger, hope, laughter, enthusiasm, passion, or despair (...) They were claimed wholly by their environment and could imagine no other." (*BB* 115-116) Fully under the control of their parents and other figures of authority, these children have no capacity for critical thinking, as Richard observes when approached by a classmate who is sent to convince Richard to convert: "he had neither known nor felt anything of life for himself; he had been carefully reared by his mother and father and he had always been told what to feel." (*BB* 128) Accustomed to having to take care of himself and make his own decisions in order to survive in the streets, Richard cannot envision giving up thinking for himself. In his eyes, instead of providing them with support, the religious community drenches young African American children of their vital energy and imagination, which limits them not only in their role within the African American community, but also in relation to white people.

To Richard it seems that his highly religious grandmother inhabits a bizarre world shaped according to rules he cannot accept, which are not in accordance with his own sense of reality. This feeling becomes particularly pressing when his grandmother repeatedly forbids him to work on Saturdays, even though the entire family is chronically suffering from a lack of food and Saturday is the only day Richard would have time to go to work. His grandmother's insistence that his soul's salvation depends on such a triviality seems ludicrous to Richard. Religion standing in the way of his personal development, he feels greatly frustrated: "I cursed myself for being made to live a different and crazy life."[95] (*BB* 139) Apart from considering the church's teachings flawed from an epistemic point of view,

[95] Whitted sees an explanation for "Granny's slavish allegiance to 'sacred time'" and Richard's objections to such an approach in the theories of Mircea Eliade: "Religious scholar Mircea Eliade characterizes 'sacred time' as a break in the historical present in which human existence is defined by a desire to return to a paradisaical state. Such religious nostalgia can lead to ceaseless repetition of beliefs, customs, and patterns of behavior and thus, can 'appear to be a refusal of history.' Eliade's theory resonates with Wright's perception of the black church as a space where congregants struggle to apply an outmoded belief system to an ever-changing modern landscape." Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and The Profane." *The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 90, Whitted 7.

Richard also finds its practices manipulative and overly theatrical. Moreover, religiosity does not seem to have much positive impact on his mother's and grandmother's capacity for compassion and human understanding:

> There were more violent quarrels in our deeply religious home than in the home of a gangster, a burglar, or a prostitute. (...) Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn. (*BB* 150)

The church does seems to play a distinct role in keeping the community together socially, which is sensed even by the younger generation: "We don't holler and moan in church no more. Come to church and be a member of the community."[96] (*BB* 167) However, the spiritual function of the church is not recognized by Richard. Even though he ends up succumbing to pressure and converting, he remains emotionally disconnected from his religion.

Altogether then, the ethos surrounding the church (at least the denominations Richard has become familiar with) and its rhetoric are described by Wright as unconvincing. The church plays no meaningful role in Richard's life, and although he seems to understand the need of people for transcendence, he does not believe the church can actually do much for them on this earth, and, exposed to crippling poverty and discrimination from a very young age, this failure alone would be a reason for him not to get involved with it.

In "How 'Bigger' Was Born" Wright recognizes the church as an institution which has in the past been able to channel the emotions emerged from the African Americans' dissatisfaction with what life was offering them. As Wright puts it, people are from their birth plagued with a primary fear, and "accompanying this first fear, is, for the want of a better name, a reflex urge toward ecstasy, complete submission, and trust." (*HBWB* xxv) According to Wright, these feelings are at the origin of people's need for religion, and untamed, they are also at the origin of rebellious behavior. This function of religion is further specified in *Native Son*, through the words of Bigger's attorney Max, as that of providing people with a myth that explains the human condition, and provides guidelines on how to live life, "cast in terms of cosmic images and symbols which swallow the soul in fullness and wholeness." (*NS* 365) For

[96] This echoes Montgomery's observation that when African Americans were emancipated and gained greater access to education and better social positions, there was a certain feeling among them that their religious life had some outdated features, and the younger generation manifested "an intolerance of the older generation of preachers who had for so long been leaders in their communities but now symbolized the past rather than the future. They were embarrassed by the clergy's lack of education and by the uncontrolled emotionalism that often substituted for a solid scriptural exegesis in Sunday sermons." (Montgomery 334)

the category of "Negroes completely under the influence of the church," (*NS* 365) it is one of the possible strategies to cope with life.

However, the number of African Americans who are willing to submit to the church and not ask anything of society is decreasing, according to Wright. While society is undergoing a profound transformation, the church is failing to maintain contact with the younger generation. As a result, these youngsters live in "a world whose metaphysical meanings had vanished; a world in which God no longer exist[s] as a daily focal point of men's lives; a world in which men c[an] no longer retain their faith in an ultimate hereafter." (*HBWB* xix) For Bigger and his peers "this primitive fear and ecstasy were naked, exposed, unprotected by religion or a framework of government or a scheme of society, (...) faith or belief; opened to every trivial blast of daily or hourly circumstance." (*HBWB* xxv) As Max puts it, art, science and politics have taken over the role of religion in the lives of people who are able to get an education and an appropriate position in society. However, African Americans "have access to none of these highly crystallized modes of expression, save that of religion. And many of them know religion only in its more primitive form." (*NS* 366) For those African Americans who feel alienated from their community, it is too late to reconnect with religion. In Max's words, "The environment of tense urban centers has all but paralyzed the impulse for religion as a way of life for them today." (*NS* 366)

A telling example of a man in such a situation is the character of Bigger. He is not willing to accept religion as a way of facing life, he refuses to "make believe that things are solved, that he [is] happy when he [is] not," (*NS* 226) and he violently rejects his mother's and Bessie's coping mechanisms: "He hated his mother for that way of hers which was like Bessie's. What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion." (*NS* 226) Although Bigger longs for "another orbit between two poles that would let him live again, (...) a vast configuration of images and symbols whose magic and power could lift him up" (*NS* 256) and at one point he promises his mother that he will pray for God's forgiveness, inwardly he remains convinced that there will be no afterlife in which he and his family could reunite and that "when he died, it would be over, forever." (*NS* 278)

Similarly to Richard in *Black Boy*, Bigger feels a profound sense of detachment from his community, which is something he would like to change, but does not see as possible, as he feels that there is "too much difference between them, [that] unity [is] possible only (...) in

fear and in shame, not in hope." (*NS* 109) In the same way as was discussed regarding Richard in *Black Boy*, in Bigger's mind, the church stands for weakness and emasculation. When he is hiding from the police, he hears people singing in a church and their music "sings of surrender and resignation," (*NS* 237) which is something he is unwilling to accept. Similarly, when he is confronted by the priest, he does not want to surrender to religion: "the preacher had told him to bow down and ask for a mercy he knew he needed; but his pride would never let him do that, not this side of the grave." (*NS* 288) Finally, when asked about religion by Max: "But the church promises eternal life?", he retorts: "That's for whipped folks." (*NS* 330) An additional reason to reject the church was already hinted at above, and it is that of the antagonism of the whites towards black people being projected into religion. To Bigger, the black church offers no appropriate help with the fact that "[t]o those who wanted to kill him he was not human, not included in that picture of Creation." (*NS* 264)

Although Baldwin had always felt much closer to religion than Wright, as a young preacher he very quickly began to suspect that there was something about the church which was strongly connected with manipulation and a will to power. Even as he was giving out Christian leaflets to his classmates, Baldwin wondered whether the rhetoric of these writings did not resort to a certain form of blackmail, a feeling he explains as follows: "People, I felt, ought to love the Lord *because* they loved him, and not because they were afraid of going to Hell." (*FNT* 37) Suddenly, the young James Baldwin realized that the Bible was written and translated by men, with all the limitations it implies. And even though he had visions which he sometimes believed were sent to him by God, he still felt that the church was for him a mere battleground over power between him and his father. He also realized that the ministers he knew were hypocritical about their personal lives. In general, Baldwin felt that preachers were merely putting on a show for the believers: "Being in the pulpit was like being in the theatre; I was behind the scenes and I knew how the illusion worked." (*FNT* 39)

In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin also adds that the practice of conversion, the process in which a member of the congregation gets "saved," is fashioned in such a way that it makes the new church members "utterly drained and exhausted," and thus makes them feel the need of a protective church more strongly than ever. However, according to Baldwin, "there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair." (*FNT* 40) In Baldwin's eyes, the power of the black churches is based on the same principles as that of white churches, namely "Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror," instead of the proclaimed

notions of "Faith, Hope, and Charity." (*FNT* 34-35) It does not aim to free people, but to make them afraid and subservient. Instead of becoming a way of transcending people's earthly problems, "the vision people hold of the world to come is but a reflection, with predictable wishful distortions, of the world in which they live." For instance, Baldwin is critical of a view which promotes the idea that black people are better Christians than whites and Heaven is reserved for them: "Was Heaven, then, to be merely another ghetto?" (*FNT* 40)

When Baldwin is approached by Elijah Muhammad, he is fascinated by the Nation of Islam in that he sees it has managed to

> heal and redeem drunkards and junkies, to convert people who have come out of prison and to keep them out, (...) and to invest both the male and the female with a pride and a serenity that hang about them like an unfailing light, (...) all these things, which our Christian church has spectacularly failed to do. (*FNT* 49)

However, Elijah's reasoning seems flawed to Baldwin, as it is simply an inversion of the white discourse, equally hateful and equally absurd, and only serves the purpose of "sanctification of power." (*FNT* 48)

The idea that the practices of black Christian churches do not provide the believers with love and tolerance, do not have the effect of making them more accepting, but on the contrary push them to become judgmental while at the same time surrendering their individuality, is also elaborated by Baldwin in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Although the novel ends in the conversion of the main hero, the image of religion remains ambivalent throughout the narrative. The "ironic distance"[97] the narrator keeps from the story can for instance be traced on the way in which all of the adults who form the religious community are systematically referred to as "saints," even when their dirtiest deeds are revealed. In Davis's words, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* "Baldwin fashions what might be called a counter-sermon, fleshing out what rests behind the audience's 'Amen'."[98] Thus despite the fact that John makes the decision to embrace religion, through the stories of his older family members the reader becomes aware of the possible consequences of such a choice which John might have to deal with in the future.

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[97] Bone 33. See also Bone's remark concerning conversion in *Mountain*: "[t]his theme, to be sure, is handled ironically. Baldwin's protagonist 'gets religion,' but he is too young, too frightened, and too innocent to grasp the implications of his choice." (Bone 33)

[98] Davis, Heavenly Voice 325.

The story of John's adoptive father Gabriel constitutes a particularly negative example of how a religious attitude can affect individuals' lives. In his younger days, Gabriel proudly rejects religion. However, one day, feeling particularly miserable, he decides to accept its consolations. Already at this point, it is hinted that his motivations are less than holy: "Yes, he wanted power - he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed. (...) He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God." (*Mountain* 106) Gabriel manages to become a respected preacher and gain authority within his community. Nevertheless, such a position comes with a price, as Gabriel finds it impossible to reconcile his new set of values with his natural impulses. He becomes convinced that he must suppress all of his passionate feelings and live his life as a perfect "saint," lest he be damned. However, this leads to him feeling constantly frustrated and unable to live to the fullest. According to Baldwin, it is wrong to put people in such a predicament: "This, to Baldwin, is the historical betrayal of the Negro Church. In exchange for the power of the Word, the Negro trades away the personal power of his sex and the social power of his people."[99] As a consequence, African Americans fail to feel empowered enough to take a stand for themselves within American society.

On the character of Gabriel Baldwin shows how the church subjugates its members, putting them under pressure to make all their decisions keeping in mind that they are being watched by God and the community. That forces them to sacrifice their personal preferences and aspirations. Gabriel thought it was God's wish for him to marry Deborah, but their union remains joyless and only leads to Gabriel cheating on his wife and lying to her. Moreover, his fear of a rejection by the community prevents him from acknowledging his illegitimate son, a decision which will lead to the death of both the son and his mother. Gabriel's reaction is to try to expiate his mistake by marrying Elizabeth and adopting her son. However, he is unable to overcome his resentment toward John and ends up treating him poorly, while John has no idea what he has done to deserve it.

Moreover, John is yet another character whose motivation to convert is connected with a will to gain power. His conversion is based on similar grounds as that of Baldwin himself, as it is described in *The Fire Next Time*: "John puts God in his service, apparently to rejoin his father in a shared affection, but in reality to supersede him (...) by becoming a better preacher,

[99] Bone 32.

John will be a saint, one of the elect, inviolable."[100] As Davis puts it, at the end of the novel "John is saved, but he has yet to be tried."[101] Although he seemingly becomes a full member of the religious community, he does not reach an understanding with the others, as he still ignores his family's secrets. Therefore, the novel ends without its main conflicts being settled, "[John's] identity remains that of a child (...) [and] both the psychological and the dramatic design carry over the denouement into a 'fifth act.'"[102]

John's decision is safe instead of being self-affirming, and in the end he is still unable to stand for himself, and needs to seek protection and confirmation from Elisha. As a result, "we suffer to see verified his inability to liberate himself." The novel ends in a feeling of compromise: "In John's case, he undergoes a spiritual journey that leads him to accept a judgmental and punishing Christianity as the price of belonging."[103] Even the shared experience of religious ecstasy does not lead to reconciliation. At the very end of the novel, John smiles at his father, but Gabriel does not find it in himself to smile back. John remains for him "Elizabeth's presumptuous bastard boy, grown suddenly so old in evil," (*Mountain* 173) who reminds him of all the people he has done wrong and who have come to feel contempt for him.[104] According to Gabriel's interpretation in which elements from his life need to get connected to biblical stories in order to make sense, John, who becomes Ishmael, "the son of the bondwoman," (*Mountain* 122) stands where his legitimate son should be, and all of Gabriel's religiousness does not help him overcome his frustration at such an outcome.

5.2. A way out?

Both Wright and Baldwin sought to explore the possible ways in which the religious discourse, with all its oppressive features, could be transcended. In *Black Boy*, refusing the way of life which is presented to him as the only viable option, Richard has to struggle to do something about his "thirst (...) to conquer and transcend the implacable limitations of human

[100] Fabre 127.
[101] Davis 324.
[102] Fabre 128.
[103] Beavers 191. See also Kent: "The final movement is the questionable flight of John Grimes from the quest for identity into the ostensible safety of religious ecstasy." (Kent 18)
[104] "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 John did not drop his eyes, but seemed to want to stare forever into the bottom of Gabriel's soul." (*Mountain* 173)

life." (*BB* 132) He needs an alternative to the narrative of life which is prevalent around him. As mentioned for instance by Davis or Whitted, *Black Boy* can be read as the story of a writer finding his own voice.[105] It is noticeable that Richard's drive to create stories gets awakened in confrontation with religious teachings. When listening to church sermons, Richard and other boys his age automatically adapt religious stories to their own perception of reality: "[s]ome of the Bible stories were interesting in themselves, but we always twisted them, secularized them to the level of our street life, rejecting all meanings that did not fit into our environment. And we did the same to the beautiful hymns." (*BB* 93)

Later Richard promises his grandmother he will try to pray, but locked in his room all afternoon, he finds himself unable to do so. In an attempt to keep his promise, he instinctively senses that he might be able to immerse himself in religious feeling better if he connects it with an act of creation, and he tries to write a religious hymn. However, his attempt fails and finally, during "a transformative moment in which he refuse[s] to be bound by his grandmother's siren-like religious obligations,"[106] he writes a short story based entirely on his imagination. (*BB* 132-133) As noted by Whitted, "the story is made sacred through [Wright's] account of its creation in *Black Boy*."[107] For Wright, writing is connected with personal freedom and empowerment, with the possibility to communicate with others in a meaningful way and potentially even change the state of things by drawing attention to certain issues and having one's voice heard.

When Richard admits to his grandmother that he has been publishing short stories in a newspaper, his grandmother insists, as she has previously, that all work of fiction is "the Devil's work." (*BB* 185) However, Richard does not get discouraged and when he cannot stand the oppression he has to face from his family, his community and from society as a whole, he decides to leave the South in search of a happier mode of being. Thus instead of accepting pre-made patterns of behavior, he decides to make his own rules and shape his life according to his own imagination. The sense one gets from *Black Boy* that Wright in a certain way replaced religion by writing is confirmed by Wright himself in "How 'Bigger' was born," where he states that he wrote *Native Son* "in an attitude akin to prayer" and goes on to define writing for himself as "a kind of significant living." (*HBWB* xxx)

[105] see Davis, Black Boy as Art 281-299 and Whitted 13-28.
[106] Whitted 26.
[107] Whitted 14.

As discussed by Michel Fabre, even though "the Wright of *Black Boy* is virtually self-created," the "vivid images and stories" of the sermons Wright was exposed to as a youth may have had a great influence on his writing, as through them he was "learning early lessons in story-telling and narrative technique and later [is] harkening back to them as he intertextually invokes them in his mature fiction."[108] However, as noted by Caron, Fabre fails to provide a significant amount of concrete examples of how this influence is visible in Wright's fiction.[109] While the stories of the sermons were some of the first narrative material Wright had access to, as literature was virtually banished from his home, and although he may have learned from it in terms of narrative strategies and use of imagery, Wright clearly makes a point of not accepting the church's worldview and rhetoric. His turning toward naturalism, with its emphasis on sciences, further indicates his will to distance himself from the tone of religion.[110]

In the second part of his autobiography, Wright discusses and ultimately rejects another alternative to religious life, namely that of communism. Throughout *American Hunger* the sense that the church as an institution has lost its significance persists. God is rarely ever mentioned, and does not seem to be much present in the mind of the young narrator and his peers, a feeling confirmed when Richard talks about the conversations he had with his new group of friends: "We believed that man should live by hard facts alone, and we had so long ago put God out of our minds we did not even discuss Him." (*AH* 27) Thus it seems that the young generation is simply out of touch with religion. Their lack of a stable support system, a moral framework which would provide them with an anchoring narrative, is cleverly sensed as an opportunity by the members of the Communist Party. To young people such as Wright, communism offers to fill the void left in their inner structuration of the world by the disappearance of God from their minds.

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[108] Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright,* 35, paraphrased by Caron 114.
[109] Caron 114.
[110] Stepto, taking as basis an account of Wright's of his failure to captivate an audience of African American Communists, suggests that Wright "was either unaware of, or simply refused to participate in, those viable modes of speech represented in history by the preacher and orator (...) The question of articulation (...) [rests] on a higher plane, with the expression of a moral consciousness which is racially-based. And of course this involves a celebration of those honorable codes of conduct among one's kin." (Stepto 527) These ideas support Baldwin's statement that Wright had failed to view and depict the African Americans as having a valuable cultural tradition.

From the point when Wright gets acquainted with communism, all of his mentions of God and religion are somehow associated with the Communist Party and its ideology. The idea that the church has become more or less irrelevant is contained implicitly in the fact that it is simply not discussed on its own. On one occasion, Wright draws a direct comparison between the power of attraction of the church and that of the Communist Party: "[w]ith the exception of the church and its myths and legends, there was no agency in the world so capable of making men feel the earth and the people upon it as the Communist Party." (*AH* 122) In trying to reach out to the African American community, the black members of the Party even get formally inspired by the traditions of black preachers, blending this inspiration with the influence of communist leaders such as Lenin:

> When speaking from the platform, the Negro Communists, eschewing the traditional gestures of the Negro preacher - as though they did not possess the strength to develop their own style of Communist preaching - stood straight, threw back their heads, brought the edge of the right palm down hammerlike into the outstretched left palm in a series of jerky motions to pound their point home, a mannerism that characterized Lenin's method of speaking. (*AH* 38)

Furthermore, some communists openly challenge the traditional beliefs of the community and seek to assert themselves as superior to any idea of a deity, as can be observed when a Negro communist is publicly defying God, (*AH* 41) something which even Wright finds hard to digest. However, the older generation sticks to religion and is not willing to get detached from it, to replace it by communism, as seen on the example of Wright's mother: "My mother's face showed disgust and moral loathing. She was a gentle woman. Her ideal was Christ upon the cross. How could I tell her that the Communist party wanted her to march in the streets, chanting, singing?" (*AH* 65) Unlike American churches, which remain strongly segregated, the members of the Communist Party do not seem to care at all about their fellow members' skin color. When Wright realizes that, he is intrigued and wonders: "[h]ow had these people, denying profit and home and God, made that hurdle that even the churches of America had not been able to make?" (*AH* 67) Wright then notices the similarity of African Americans with that of oppressed workers around the world and thinks they could fight together for a brighter future.

However, in Wright's eyes, communism ultimately fails at keeping its promises. This is described at length when Wright comments on his rupture with the Party. His principal objection, elaborated in *American Hunger*, but also in his essay "I Tried to Be a Communist", and summed up by Davis, is the fact that the Party employs "terrorist methods to whip into

line its undisciplined members, (...) the spying, the insults, the systematic efforts to discredit him, and the complete absence of a respect for individual liberty."[111] Wright's disappointment is further made obvious by his contribution to *The God That Failed*, a collective work describing the disillusion with communism of several famous authors.

Native Son was written before Wright decided to reject communism. However, even then Wright refused to offer the doctrine of communism as an easy solution to his hero. As summed up by Davis, Max's defense of Bigger's crime through an explanation which takes the communist doctrine as its basis, seems helpful to Bigger, but he "concludes, much to the dismay of Wright's comrades, that his salvation lies elsewhere."[112] Bigger decides to reject any narrative imposed on him which would give meaning to his acts without his own contribution. Hardened against religion, Bigger finds his open rejection of the black priest's advances, but even more so that of those of a priest who is white, sent to Bigger in a last attempt to get him to repent, empowering on a personal level:

> That had evoked in Bigger a sense of his worth almost as keen as that which Max had roused in him during the long talk that night. He felt that his making the priest stand away from him and wonder about his motives for refusing to accept the consolations of religion was a sort of recognition of his personality on a plane other than that which the priest was ordinarily willing to make. (*NS* 382)

Finally Bigger feels that he is recognized even by a white person as an individual, by defying that person's assumptions and by not being easily understandable. In his murder and in the fact that he accepts it, he finds a space all for himself, something which he never had before: "To live, he had created a new world for himself, and for that he was to die." His acts of violence thus have a transformative power, as explained by Bryant: "Wright gives murder a ritualistic function. It releases Bigger from his feelings of fear and guilt."[113]

By accepting what he has done and refusing to blame any outside circumstances, Bigger is actually ultimately able to assert his individuality outside of a role attributed to him by society, and to feel that he has power over his own life: "Bigger, too, undergoes, an evolution from a psychological prison of ignorance and vague awareness to the freedom of consciousness."[114] Instead of getting consolation from the religious story of possible redemption through repentance or from the communist story of an evil society which has

[111] Davis, Richard Wright 272.
[112] Davis, Richard Wright 279.
[113] Bryant 178.
[114] Bryant 178.

forced him to become a murderer, "Bigger, using sheer will, manages to transcend his world, to accept himself for what he is and to accept the consequences of what he has done."[115] As claimed for instance by Valerie Smith, Bigger, in the same way as Richard in *Black Boy,* manages to escape from the white narrative. They both "rely on their ability to manipulate language and its assumptions--to tell their own story--as a means of liberating themselves from the plots others impose on them."[116] However, as stated by Alessandro Portelli, unlike Richard's, Bigger's liberation is not successful enough for him to find a way to remain alive ("Society's plot imposed on Bigger, however, is to kill him, and it fully succeeds."),[117] which strongly undermines the idea that his evolution as a human being can be considered exemplary. The fact that Bigger has to die in order to prove to himself he is fully human would hardly have been considered acceptable by Baldwin.

As was discussed above, Baldwin's view of the current state of society is highly critical. However, he also strives to offer some potential solutions. According to Kent, the key question which permeates all of Baldwin's work is "[h]ow can one achieve, amid the dislocations and disintegrations of the modern world, true, functional being?"[118] The answer for Baldwin lies in a rejection of all institutions which prevent people from achieving their true human potential, and religion is mentioned most prominently as such a hindering entity. Baldwin even goes so far as to claim: "It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (...) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church." (*FNT* 46) As explained by Baldwin, religion would only be useful insofar as it would be truly helping people open up to the world and all the positive values to be found in it. However, if it fails to do so, it should lose any authority it has over people's lives: "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, it is time to get rid of him." (*FNT* 46)

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[115] Katherine Fishburn, *Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel-Victim* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1977) 71, quoted in Alessandro Portelli, "Everybody's healing novel: Native Son and its contemporary critical context," *The Mississippi Quarterly* (1997) 256. *Literature Resource Center*. 11 Aug. 2012. <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA168292110&v=2.1&u=karlova&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>

[116] Valerie Smith, Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Fiction (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) 70, quoted in Portelli 257.

[117] Portelli 257.

[118] Kent 17.

According to Baldwin, people should aim to fill their lives with love, which is a concept he understands as connected with "a state of being, or a state of grace − not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth." (*FNT* 82) As explained by Charlotte Alexander, achieving such a state serves to Baldwin "as both means and end of greater human understanding."[119] The ultimate goal of individuals is to be able to transcend all limiting categories, namely for instance that of race, but also all of the values which organized religion imposes upon people. (*FNT* 72) According to Baldwin, "the hope of Heaven has always been a metaphor for the achievement of this particular state of grace," (*FNT* 68) but once religion stops being operated on the basis of love, and people stop perceiving the metaphorical values of such images and are willing to obey the church blindly just to feel more safe, it becomes necessary to "pull God down from Heaven" (*FNT* 68) and embrace one's humanity without fear or shame. Baldwin believes that if people are able to approach life without fear, in a state of openness, to accept life's pains but also its pleasures, with no false consolations and an aim of self-discovery, they can fully accept and develop their individual identity as human beings.[120] Fear can only be overcome by being confronted, not by an escape into religion. Such an approach has its significance not only in personal terms, but also on a societal level, as according to Baldwin "the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of the nation." (*FNT* 77)

Go Tell It on the Mountain illustrates such a "struggle for identity."[121] However, as discussed earlier, John's quest is not fully successful and the ending of the novel remains open, with a sense that things have yet to be settled. Hope can be found in the fact that John has understood his connection to his community, has "discovered his humanity,"[122] and despite his father's negative attitude has managed to smile at Gabriel and assert that he is "ready, coming, on [his] way." (*Mountain* 254) Perhaps then John will find it in himself to battle for his own identity and finally redefine himself.

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[119] Charlotte Alexander, "The 'Stink' of Reality: Mothers and Whores in James Baldwin's Fiction," *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays,* ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 94.

[120] "That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth - and, indeed, no church - can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. (...) [O]ne eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne." (*FNT* 84)

[121] Kent 18.

[122] Bone 38.

Similarly to Wright, Baldwin also puts a strong emphasis on the power of words. As noted by Bone, when Baldwin decided to supersede his father, "he discovered in his gift for language a means of liberation."[123] While being a preacher ultimately fails to fulfill Baldwin's expectations, he utilizes his sensitivity for the "poetry of suffering," or "power of the Word"[124] and develops a discourse which is fully his own, but makes use of notions he has assimilated at church. As mentioned by Charles Newman, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, "the futile beauty of the Negro church is dealt with by incorporating its esthetic while rejecting it as an institution."[125] Moreover, Calvin Hernton explains that Baldwin "remains a religious existentialist."[126] While rejecting the church's doctrine, in order to make sense of the world, he still uses concepts he has gotten familiar with through religion.[127] As Hernton puts it, "[i]f the elements of a situation are viewed in religious terms, then it follows that the resolution of the situation must come in and through religious measures such as, for instance, forgiveness."[128]

[123] Bone 49.
[124] Bone 36-37.
[125] Charles Newman, "The Lesson of the Master: Henry James and James Baldwin." *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 59.
[126] Calvin C. Hernton, "A Fiery Baptism," *James Baldwin; a collection of critical essays,* ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 116.
[127] "Baldwin's existentialism is rooted in religion, in spirituality, in the metaphysical (...) in analyzing the race problem Baldwin has dealt primarily with aspects such as *hate*, *anguish*, *guilt*, *conscience*, *internal torture*, *sin* and *iniquity* (...) when it comes to alleviating the race problem his key concepts include *love*, *redemption*, *cleansing the heart*, *forgiveness*, *endurance* and so on." (Hernton 116)
[128] Hernton 116.

6. Conclusion

The chief aim of the thesis has been to examine the ways in which an image of religion is constructed in selected works by Richard Wright and James Baldwin. The first part of the thesis has dealt with Wright's and Baldwin's beliefs about how to represent life from an African American perspective. Baldwin's concern is that Wright is reinforcing the white discourse by creating black characters which are not fully credible as human beings. Baldwin also fears Wright fails to recognize that African Americans have a cultural tradition of their own which helps them lead more satisfying lives. Moreover, according to Baldwin, Wright does not acknowledge the underlying unconscious self-hatred which is at the root of many racial problems. In Baldwin's eyes, such a self-hatred is not race-specific, but is common to people in general, and bringing the mechanisms on which it is based to light would help promote an understanding between people of all races.

The next part has dealt with Wright's and Baldwin's representations of religion within the context of race in America. In *Native Son*, Wright demonstrates how white people use a religious rhetoric to make the African Americans feel inferior and how they do not hesitate to present a black person who has transgressed the rules of white society as subhuman in the eyes of God. In *Black Boy*, the white and the black world are kept separate in terms of religion, and there is not much sense that the white discourse has been implanted into the black characters' minds. The African American characters are shown as suffering from great fear, which is presumably reinforced by the oppression they have to face from the whites, but the roots of that fear are not analyzed in detail, at least not in relation to people's religious attitudes.

Baldwin, on the other hand, examines the American racial dynamics between blacks and whites in more complexity. Like Wright, he acknowledges the deep-grown fear which pervades the African American community, but he goes further in his analysis and directly connects it with the African Americans' history. Moreover, Baldwin incorporates biblical stories into his works, and he shows how the characters internalize these in order to make sense of the world around them, often with results which limit them in their personal development. He demonstrates that to cope with the demands of life in American society, blacks sometimes outwardly reject the white discourse, but innerly let themselves be

influenced by it. Either the African Americans use exactly the same strategies as whites do, but reverse the discourse and present themselves as superior to the white majority (as discussed at length in *The Fire Next Time*), or, with the aim of gaining power over others and not feeling quite at the bottom of society, they reproduce the models of behavior of whites while dealing with other black people. This is illustrated in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, where Baldwin encodes the white versus black dynamic into the behavior of black characters. His narrative strategies incite the reader to consider the validity of concepts such as race. Ultimately Baldwin stresses the universality of certain human models of dealing with the world and with one's own feelings of insecurity.

The next section of the thesis explores how religion is perceived within the African American community. Both Wright and Baldwin stress the oppression their characters, who are perceived as the Other within the society they would like to belong to, have to face not only from society in general but also from their own community. Not even an adaptation of the religious discourse to the African American context and a proclaimed emphasis on an individual relationship to the deity has helped avoid and overcome such a pressure. What emerges in both Wright's and Baldwin's works is a strongly dichotomic vision of society, in which one has to convert to religion or succumb forever to a life of crime and sin. The two authors stress the amount of antagonism pervading the African American community, in which most seem afraid of the possibility someone of their own race could rise above their level. Moreover, the characters are governed by a fear that any transgression might prove fatal to them, be it in society or in the eyes of God, and the parental figures transmit this fear to their progeny.

The African American religious groups attract new members by offering them a feeling of security and connection with the congregation. In order to achieve that, they rely on emotionally powerful church rituals, driven by inspired preachers and supported by an active role of the congregation. In Wright's view, these rituals are functionally empty, but Baldwin shows that they can help people transcend their everyday worries and develop a sense of identity and belonging, as individuals feel accompanied by the community in their personal battles on the road to salvation. Another point in which Wright and Baldwin differ is that Wright presents religiosity as emasculating, connected with personal weakness, whereas Baldwin offers a view according to which it can help people gain power. Baldwin's works also clearly show a formal inspiration by religious discourse, although Baldwin is critical of

the implications of the church's rhetoric. Overall Wright and Baldwin both come to the conclusion that people "flee to the church" (*FNT* 32) because of an incapacity to face their existential fear on their own. Baldwin's depiction is again more detailed than Wright's, but that is natural considering his personal background and given the main topic of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Both Wright and Baldwin, aware of the limitations of church practices, offer various alternative ways of coping with life. To Wright, the main issue is that religion presents an interpretation of life which is not in accordance with reality, and only offers a false consolation without any actual solution; it paralyzes people instead of allowing them to move forward. Wright's solution lies in an assertion of one's individuality through thoroughly independent acts, and in "embracing a creative attitude toward life." (*AH* 41) He considers the communist doctrine as possibly being able to take over where the church's rhetoric is outdated, but comes to condemn communism as based on similarly oppressive principles. Baldwin criticizes the hypocrisy of religious discourse. According to him, churches base their success on fear and hatred, instead of the proclaimed love and tolerance. Like Wright, he seeks a solution in an assertion of the self, devoid of fear or shame, together with an understanding view of humanity as a whole.

Altogether, Baldwin presents a less simplified view of African American life than Wright, at least in the realm of religion. He puts more emphasis on the African American cultural tradition, and considers a wider variety of patterns of behavior as legitimate modes of being for a black person in America. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin gives voice to a multitude of individual characters, each of whom goes through a uniquely shaped religious experience. Thus unlike Wright he demonstrates that the African American experience cannot be reduced to a limited number of clearly definable models.

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