

ESSAY

“To Crush the Serpent”: James Baldwin, the Religious Right, and the Moral Minority

Joseph Vogel Merrimack College

Abstract

In the 1980s, James Baldwin recognized that a major transformation had occurred in the socio-political functions of religion. His critique adapted accordingly, focusing on the ways in which religion—particularly white evangelical Christianity—had morphed into a movement deeply enmeshed with mass media, conservative politics, and late capitalism. Religion in the Reagan era was leveraged, sold, and consumed in ways never before seen, from charismatic televangelists, to Christian-themed amusement parks, to mega-churches. The new movement was often characterized as the “religious right” or the “Moral Majority” and was central to both Reagan’s political coalition as well as the broader culture wars. For Baldwin, this development had wide-ranging ramifications for society and the individual. This article draws on Baldwin’s final major essay, “To Crush the Serpent” (1987), to examine the author’s evolving thoughts on religion, salvation, and transgression in the context of the Reagan era.

Keywords: James Baldwin, religion, Moral Majority, religious right, Ronald Reagan, “To Crush the Serpent,” 1980s

At some point in the 1980s, James Baldwin must have been flipping through channels on TV and stumbled upon an appearance of Jerry Falwell on *Nightline*, or perhaps Pat Robertson’s talk show, *The 700 Club*, or maybe Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s Praise the Lord (PTL) network. These figures were so ubiquitous during the Reagan era it would have been difficult not to. While we may never know the full range of thoughts looming behind those large, inquisitive eyes, Baldwin, fortunately, did leave behind a written record on the subject that offers important insights into the author’s evolving thoughts on religion, salvation, and transgression from the final decade of his life.

Religion was always a major theme in James Baldwin's work. From his first 1953 novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, to his last in 1979, *Just Above My Head*, it served as a crucial vehicle through which his characters struggled, connected, explored, and evolved. Religion was also the language in which his prose moved: its rhythms, cadences, and vocabulary. A survey of Baldwin's work finds constant references to spirituals, gospel songs, Bible stories, proverbs, and adages. While Baldwin personally left the Church and his role as preacher in adolescence, he remained, even in his final years, fascinated by it. As Joanna Brooks observes: "What Baldwin could not be, think, say, or do in the church he did in his writing, even as he carried forward in his writing spiritual, moral, aesthetic, and rhetorical impulses he first learned at church."¹

Yet in spite of its significance to the author's life and work, as Douglas Field notes, the renaissance in Baldwin studies has in many ways overlooked the religious dimensions in his work in favor of more popular theoretical discussions of race, gender, and sexuality.² There are, of course, some notable exceptions, including two substantial theological studies: Clarence Hardy's *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (2003) and Josiah Ulysses Young's *James Baldwin's Understanding of God* (2014). There have also been a handful of important chapters and articles, including Douglas Field's excellent chapter, "James Baldwin's Religion," from *All Those Strangers* (2015).

Part of the neglect, Field suggests, may have to do with Baldwin himself, "who steered readers away" from such criticism due to his scathing attacks on religion's efficacy and moral authority.³ Baldwin could be ruthlessly adept at cutting through religion's hypocrisies. "Being in the pulpit was like being in the theatre," he writes in "The Fire Next Time." "I was behind the scenes and knew how the illusion was worked . . . I knew how to work on a congregation until the last dime was surrendered—it was not very hard to do—and I knew where the money for 'the Lord's work' went."⁴ It was not merely that the ministers acquired big houses and Cadillacs, while the congregation wallowed in poverty, Baldwin explains. It was religion's failure to even come near to addressing the realities of day-to-day life. "The transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door."⁵ Baldwin characterizes institutional Christianity as arrogant, intolerant, and cruel. "It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being," he writes, "must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him."⁶

In addition to such blunt critiques, however, he also recognized the richness and communal power religion could offer.⁷ In one of the better-known passages from "The Fire Next Time," he describes the palpable ecstasy of the Black Pentecostal Church:

There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together

and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord. I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, as Lead-belly and so many others have testified, to 'rock'. Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, 'the Word'—when the church and I were one. Their pain and joy were mine, and mine were theirs.⁸

This intimate relationship with the Black Pentecostal Church continues in his later works, perhaps most notably in his 1979 novel, *Just Above My Head*.⁹ In his final decade, however, another important dimension emerges in Baldwin's commentary on religion: his direct engagement with the new, mass-mediated, predominantly white, born-again Christian movement. By the 1980s, Baldwin recognized, a major transformation had occurred in the socio-political functions of religion. His critique adapted accordingly, focusing on the ways in which religion—particularly white evangelical Christianity—had morphed into a movement deeply enmeshed with mass media, politics, and late capitalism. Religion in the Reagan era was being leveraged, sold, and consumed in ways never before seen, from charismatic televangelists, to Christian-themed amusement parks, to mega-churches. "The people who call themselves 'born again' today," wrote Baldwin, "have simply become members of the richest, most exclusive private club in the world, a club that the man from Galilee could not possibly hope—or wish—to enter."¹⁰ The new movement was often characterized as the "religious right" or the "Moral Majority" and was central to both Reagan's political coalition as well as the broader culture wars.¹¹

For Baldwin, this development had wide-ranging ramifications for society and the individual, from Christian-fueled militarism to the so-called "prosperity gospel." In "To Crush the Serpent" he focuses particularly on the definitions and uses of the sinner or transgressor in the context of Reagan-era obsessions with the body and sexuality. The title references a prophecy from Genesis 3:15, from the Garden of Eden: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." How might this prophecy be interpreted? Who or what does the serpent represent? Why should it be crushed? For Baldwin, the answer has to do with shame, guilt, and terror. To crush the serpent is to crush desire, and, therefore, to crush the putative transgressor. Lurking behind this impulse to police and punish, Baldwin believed, was self-loathing and terror of the flesh. "This accounts for the violence of our TV screen and cinema, a violence far more dangerous than pornography," he writes. "What we are watching is a compulsive reliving of the American crimes; what we are watching with the [Jerry] Falwells and [Pat] Robertsons is an attempt to exorcise ourselves."¹²

Despite significant new contributions highlighting Baldwin's relationship to Pentecostalism and the Holiness movement, there has been no focused critical

examination of Baldwin's engagement with Christianity in the 1980s, or on "To Crush the Serpent," the last major article published before his death in 1987. This essay attempts to fill this gap with a historicized reading of Baldwin's article in the context of the rise of the religious right.

To fully understand Baldwin's critique of born-again Christianity in "To Crush the Serpent," it is helpful to flesh out the context. Born-again Christianity not only impacted the 1980s; it changed America in ways that are still being felt today. A direct line can be traced from George W. Bush's evangelical base in the 2000s, or today's Tea Party, back to the fundamentalist Christian renaissance that emerged on the cusp of the Reagan era. A coalition of like-minded sects intent on "re-taking America," the religious right was, as Lauren Winner puts it, "a political force to be reckoned with."¹³ A less prominent presence on the political stage for much of the twentieth century, they began to mobilize in the 1960s and 1970s around social issues and "family values." Richard Nixon famously identified part of this growing constituency as the "silent majority" in a 1969 speech defending the Vietnam War.¹⁴ For Nixon, however, the silent majority was not yet specifically identified as Christian; rather, this was an appeal to "middle America" and to a general wariness of the growing counterculture.

The political rise of born-again Christians first revealed itself, ironically given its subsequent loyalty to the Republican party, with the candidacy of a Democratic president: Jimmy Carter. A Southern Baptist from Plains, Georgia, Carter often taught Sunday School in his hometown even after becoming governor of Georgia. His story was compelling: a peanut farmer who, through pluck and hard work, worked his way up the political ladder and realized the American Dream. Following the political corruption and disillusionment of the previous decade, he based his campaign on religiously infused moral principles of honesty, humility, human rights, and care for the poor. In the 1976 election, Carter managed to garner nearly half of the evangelical vote, and become the first born-again president. *Newsweek* called 1976 the "Year of the Evangelical."¹⁵

Carter's ascendance was remarkable on a number of levels, not the least of which was the diverse coalition he put together to defeat Republican incumbent Gerald Ford. Even James Baldwin, notoriously scathing in his criticism of elected officials, tenuously supported Carter. In an open letter published in the *New York Times* in January 1977, he documented some of the issues the new president must confront. "I am not so much trying to bring your mind to the suffering of a despised people," he wrote "—a very comforting notion, after all, for most Americans—as the state and the fate of a nation of which you are the elected leader . . . Too many of us are in jail, my friend; too many of us are starving, too many of us can find no door open."¹⁶ He concludes his letter: "I must add, in honor, that I write to you because I love our country: And you, in my lifetime, are the only president to whom I would have written."¹⁷

Carter had not even been sworn into office, however, before his coalition began to break apart, starting with the born-again Christians. In a now infamous 1976 interview with *Playboy* magazine, Carter confessed to having lusted in his heart.

"I've looked on a lot of women with lust," he revealed. "I've committed adultery in my heart many times. This is something that God recognizes I will do—and I have done it—and God forgives me for it."¹⁸ Carter's remarks set off a media frenzy. Among conservative Christians, such candor was met with outrage. Beyond his comments, the very fact that he gave an interview to a putatively pornographic magazine like *Playboy* caused some to question his faith and morality. Following the interview, Carter dropped 15 points in the polls.¹⁹ More significantly over the long haul, evangelicals began a mass exodus from the Democratic Party that has remained largely unchanged to this day.

The political messiah to lead Christians out of the liberal wilderness turned out to be a man named Ronald Reagan. A twice-divorced former Hollywood actor, Reagan was not, on the surface, a natural fit for evangelicals. He did not have a miraculous conversion story, and rarely spoke at any length about his theological views. As Steven P. Miller writes, "Ronald Reagan was more an evangelical's president than an evangelical president."²⁰ But he did share many of the same ideological sensibilities and figured out quickly how to communicate whose side he was on in the emerging culture wars.²¹ "I know you can't endorse *me*," he famously told born-again Christians at a 1980 rally in Dallas, Texas. "But I want you to know that I endorse *you* and what you are doing."²² As it turned out, evangelicals *did* endorse Reagan in a paradigmatic shift in American politics.

Reagan's 1979–80 campaign for the presidency began just as the religious right was coalescing. In a 1980 "Washington for Jesus" rally attended by over 200,000 people, Pat Robertson proclaimed, "We have together, with the Protestants and the Catholics, enough votes to run the country. And when the people say, 'We've had enough,' we are going to take over."²³ By this time, Robertson had become an enormously influential figure in the Christian community, having established the Christian Broadcast Network (CBN) in the 1960s, and later *The 700 Club*, which, by the 1980s, aired on over 200 television stations.²⁴ A former Southern Baptist minister from Lexington, Virginia, Robertson was telegenic and understood how to use new media to spread his message in an accessible way to a mass audience. In 1979, he laid out an "Action Plan for the 1980s," calling for a "profound moral revival" based on "Biblical Christianity."²⁵ In the plan, he specifically highlights the "awesome power of the media to mold our moral and political consensus."²⁶ Robertson advocates that Christians "do everything in their power to get involved in media (radio, television, newspapers, magazines) . . . [to] learn motion picture techniques, produce drama, write music, publish books—anything to produce a climate of righteousness and godliness."²⁷

Robertson had a major ally in this effort in Reverend Jerry Falwell. Like Robertson, Falwell was media-savvy and deft in his ability to shape public discourse for mass audiences. His television show, *Old-Time Gospel Hour*, was watched by millions of viewers across America. In addition, in the 1980s he often appeared on mainstream television shows like *Nightline* and *Face the Nation*. Like Robertson, Falwell had a Reagan conversion story, claiming that he left a 1980 meeting with Reagan "with a fire burning in my heart. In answer to prayer and

hard work, God had given us a great leader.”²⁸ Perhaps the most prominent and influential voice of the religious right in the Reagan era, Falwell was born and raised in Lynchburg, Virginia, where under his ministry of the Thomas Road Baptist Church, membership exploded to over 17,000 people, making it one of the first mega-churches. In 1971, he also established Liberty University, which would become the largest evangelical Christian university in the world. He founded the political action group, the Moral Majority, in 1979. Its purpose was to wed conservative Christian social values, often described as “family values,” with politics. In this way, it was ideologically aligned with the religious right—indeed, the two terms would often be used interchangeably in the 1980s to describe the broader cultural Christian movement.

Falwell’s political activism, like that of many white Southern born-again Christians, was largely a response to cultural changes in America. As a young minister, he believed the roles of religious leaders and elected officials were fundamentally different. “Preachers are not called to be politicians, but soul winners,” he said in 1965.²⁹ In the intervening years, however, as major shifts in American culture took place—including the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Rights Amendment, and *Roe vs. Wade*—he had a change of heart. “God is angry with us as a nation,” Falwell declared. “I have a divine mandate to go right into the halls of Congress and fight for laws that will save America.”³⁰ Not so coincidentally, Falwell’s first dip into political waters was an attempt to protect the status quo on issues of race. Like most white southern evangelicals, Falwell was enraged by changes to Jim Crow, and refused to support Lyndon B. Johnson’s civil rights bills specifically, and any efforts at integration more broadly. “It is a terrible violation of human and private property rights,” he claimed. “It should be considered civil wrongs rather than civil rights.”³¹ In 1968, he opened his pulpit to George Wallace, former governor of Alabama, perhaps best known for his intransigent, “Segregation Now, Segregation Tomorrow, Segregation Forever” speech.³²

In the 1970s, Richard Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” used code, euphemism, or “dog whistles” to activate white conservative fears about race, gender, sexuality, and the loss of traditional values.³³ While this strategy was used effectively by “moderate” conservative politicians like Nixon and Reagan, however, culture warriors like Falwell and Robertson could be more blunt. In the 1980s, the religious right latched onto a range of social causes that would define the decade’s culture wars: prayer in classrooms, pornography, language arts curriculum, gender roles, homosexuality, AIDS, the war on drugs, and abortion. All of these issues, Falwell believed, were indicative of America’s social and moral decline; his responses were often aggressive, uncompromising, and inflammatory. “Though they claim to be another poorly treated minority,” he said of gays, “homosexuals are involved in open immorality as they practice perversion . . . they are not a minority any more than murderers, rapists or other sinners are a minority. Since they cannot reproduce, they proselytize.”³⁴ In concert with Reagan’s campaign for the presidency, he rallied the evangelical troops, casting the culture wars as a holy war. By the time Reagan was elected in 1980, Falwell was described as a “political kingmaker.”³⁵

Not surprisingly, he was among the first visitors invited to Reagan's White House. Meanwhile, the rise of the Moral Majority and the religious right became one of the top political stories of 1980.

As the Reagan era continued, some journalists began describing the emerging evangelical media infrastructure—which included TV and radio shows, telethons, direct mail campaigns, magazines, Bible schools, colleges, and Christian-themed amusement parks—as the “Electric Church.”³⁶ This movement was invigorated by Ronald Reagan's landmark elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, a longstanding policy signed into law by Harry Truman in 1949 whose aim was to ensure fairness and balance on the airwaves. Without regulation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the floodgates opened for more polemical religious and conservative content on television and radio. The Electric Church also benefitted from the births of cable and VHS home video. Less than twenty million Americans had cable in 1980, approximately 10 percent of the population; that proportion leaped to nearly 70 percent by the end of the decade.³⁷ While some of those channels—most prominently, HBO and MTV—featured content that infuriated the religious right, conservatives were not about to cede control of the powerful new medium to the secular left. An ABC news report found that by the late 1980s, there were over 1,600 television ministers generating an astounding 1.5 billion dollars per year.³⁸ Many new channels, including the Christian Broadcast Network (CBN), featured exclusively Christian content. VHS home videos likewise went from expensive novelties in the late 1970s to near-ubiquity by the end of the 1980s. This became a crucial platform for the religious right, offering the individual more control about when, where, and how often they could watch content.

The booming market of television ministers and preachers, often referred to as “televangelists,” took advantage of these new media platforms. Among the most popular in the 1980s were Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. While the Bakkers were much less explicitly political than Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, they possessed the same media savvy and were perhaps the best example of the so-called “prosperity gospel” preached by many televangelists. The prosperity gospel, which promised financial rewards to the righteous, was a perfect fit for the Reagan era. In a time of yuppie excess and admonitions to “shop 'til you drop,” it also did nothing to discourage conspicuous consumption. God wanted people to live the good life, televangelists promised. Increasingly, according to this logic, money was seen as evidence of righteousness. God had blessed the rich; otherwise they would not be rich.

Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker began working for Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) in the 1960s; by the 1970s they had created a television channel of their own: the Praise the Lord (PTL) Club, which featured a variety of programs and was broadcast 24 hours a day. It was like MTV for evangelical Christians. In the late 1970s, they opened Heritage USA, a Christian amusement park that, as journalist Emily Johnson observes, “combined the Bakkers' growing televangelism empire with theme-park hedonism, offering an immersive experience in the sights, sounds, and practices of American conservative

evangelicalism.”³⁹ The theme park included an enormous waterpark, a Disneyland-like train, a campground, luxury hotels and condos, and a full-scale replica of Jerusalem for shopping. At approximately 2,300 acres, it was over ten times larger than Disneyland.⁴⁰ In the 1980s, the Bakkers’ television shows, theme park, and ministry were so successful, they were bringing in over 100 million dollars per year, and the couple did little to hide their resulting extravagant lifestyles.⁴¹ “If we’re called to be fishers of men, which we are, we’re simply using better bait,” Jim Bakker boasted of his multi-media approach.⁴²

Ultimately, the Bakkers’ empire came crumbling down when news broke that Jim Bakker was engaged in an affair with a 21-year-old church secretary named Jessica Hahn and had committed multiple acts of fraud and conspiracy.⁴³ Other televangelist stories of excess and corruption followed, including popular preacher Jimmy Swaggart’s televised confession that he had had sexual relations with a prostitute in 1988. Many critics felt that by the end of the 1980s the religious right was waning in the wake of several high-profile scandals. While certain figures rose and fell, however, the movement proved a resilient force in American politics. In the Obama era, Pat Robertson’s *The 700 Club* still airs on ABC Family, while two major 2016 presidential contenders, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, paid visits to Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University. New media-savvy ministers continue to thrive: evangelical Pastor Rick Warren, whose book *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002) sold in excess of thirty million copies, was invited to offer the prayer at President Obama’s 2008 inauguration, while Joel Osteen’s televised sermons draw over twenty million viewers each month.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, high-profile conservative evangelical politicians, including Mike Huckabee and Ted Cruz, staged viable national campaigns for the presidency in 2008 and 2016 respectively. Such examples speak to the powerful influence evangelical Christianity still has on all facets of American life; its defining features, issues, and strategies are rooted in the 1980s, a period in which the role of religion in American society fundamentally changed.

In this context, James Baldwin’s critique of American Christianity is fascinating for a number of reasons, including the paradox that while he came out of a strain of the born-again tradition, he was in many ways the embodiment of all it feared and despised, being black, gay, and relentlessly critical of organized religion, nationalism, and capitalism. Baldwin’s characterization of the religious right as “members of the richest, most exclusive private club in the world” cuts right to the core of the “prosperity gospel,” as well as the overarching ethos of the Reagan era.⁴⁵ Perhaps the most notable feature of domestic policy in the 1980s was its top-down economic vision, often described as Reaganomics. Ronald Reagan promised to cut taxes, eliminate regulations, and set Wall Street loose. Over his two terms in office, he did just that, and while the stock market soared, the gap between the rich and the poor widened. Inner-city poverty, homelessness, and crime all peaked during the Reagan era.⁴⁶ By the end of the 1980s, nearly 50 percent of black children were living below the poverty line. “The great, vast, shining Republic knows nothing about them and cares nothing about them,” wrote Baldwin in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*; “—recognizes their existence only in times of stress, as during

a military adventure, say, or an election year, or when their dangerous situation erupts into what the Republic generally calls a 'riot.'⁴⁷

What was the Christian response to this growing inequality and poverty? By and large, the religious right not only passively accepted Reaganomics, but actively embraced it. Increasingly, the messaging of religion, government, and corporate America were in perfect harmony. What was the message? As the character Gordon Gekko famously put it in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*: "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies and cuts through to the essence of the evolutionary spirit."⁴⁸ This was the spirit in which born-again Christianity thrived in the 1980s. Trickle-down economics replaced the widow's mite; congregations became consumers; pastors became millionaire media moguls; and Jesus's famous renunciation of wealth was replaced with the prosperity gospel. "It is scarcely worth comparing the material well-being—or material aspirations—of these latter-day apostles with the poverty of Jesus," writes Baldwin. "Whereas Jesus and his disciples were distrusted by the state largely because they respected the poor and shared everything, the fundamentalists of the present hour would appear not to know that the poor exist."⁴⁹ Indeed, the wealth of televangelists like the Bakkers, ironically, derived primarily from the cynical exploitation of poor and lower middle-class whites. Such member-consumers, Baldwin writes, are manipulated to believe that they too can be saved, forgiven, and become financially prosperous. They must only write another check to learn how. Of the leaders of this "new" commodified Christianity, Baldwin asserts: "They have taken the man from Galilee as hostage. He does not know them and they do not know him."⁵⁰

Such hypocrisy, of course, did not come out of a vacuum. It had roots. While white Christians and black Christians theoretically worshipped the same God, they were shaped by different histories. Baldwin reminds us that chattel slavery was justified by many white Christian sects and survived by many black Christians.⁵¹ The practice of not only treating people as inferior based on race, but actually *owning* them, was supported by appeals to the Bible, including the Old Testament curse laid on the sons of Ham as well as Paul's admonition for servants to obey their masters. Baldwin became aware of such religious-based rationales for oppression at a young age, and writes that "it was impossible not to sense in this a self-serving moral cowardice" which caused him to "regard white Christians, and especially, white ministers with a profound and troubled contempt."⁵² Such self-serving rationales for slavery, and later for Jim Crow, Baldwin suggests, are not unconnected to the prosperity gospel of the 1980s. It is simply the latest attempt to protect and advance power and security by and through white Christian doctrine.

Of course, Baldwin also witnessed greed, hypocrisy, and moral cowardice in his own Church. How was it different from or similar to the white born-again movement that now permeated American culture and politics? For Baldwin, the answer had to do with positioning. Among his biggest frustrations with Christianity in the black community was its pacifying effect, its complacency with injustice in the present by the promise of salvation in the next life. "When I faced a congregation,"

writes Baldwin in “The Fire Next Time,” “it began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike.”⁵³ Yet for all of his misgivings about black Christianity’s susceptibility to simply reinforce the status quo, he recognized there was more to the picture. The Black Church, in all of its various strands, was also a site of resistance; its songs were documents of strength, solidarity, resilience, and beauty. As susceptible as it might be to the problems that infected white Christianity, then, its historical positioning made it different. For Baldwin, speaking in general terms, white Christianity in America, by and large, spoke from a position of power; black Christianity from a position of struggle, resistance, and survival. While working with similar Gods, texts, and stories, then, these were translated through different languages, voices, histories, experiences, and intent.

Moreover, within black Christianity, as Douglas Field notes, Black Pentecostalism—the faith of Baldwin’s youth—was even further marginalized and animated by the protest tradition. Its identity was oppositional, anti-establishment, and averse to materialism—even if individual leaders sometimes fell prey to greed.⁵⁴ Baldwin retained much of the radical, individualist spirit of his Pentecostal faith, while finally rejecting what he saw as its fatal flaw: its fear of love. “There was no love in the church,” writes Baldwin. “It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair . . . When we were told to love everybody, I had thought that meant *everybody*. But no. It applied only to those who believed as we did.”⁵⁵ This exclusion and fear of the other, shared and inflated by many white Christian groups including the Moral Majority, began with hatred of the body.

The body, then, becomes the starting point for his exploration of modern Christianity in “To Crush the Serpent.” Baldwin’s youth was a time of great confusion, he admits, in no small part because of his Church’s teachings about sexuality. This confusion was compounded in adolescence when he became more aware of his own body. “Until adolescence,” he writes, “one’s body is simply there, like one’s shadow or the weather. With adolescence, this body becomes a malevolently unpredictable enemy, and it also becomes, for the first time, appallingly *visible*.”⁵⁶ Baldwin’s point in describing this physical transformation is to demonstrate what religion often attempts to do with this self-awareness. The body, according to the dominant strain of Christian theology, is the enemy. It is filthy, impure, prone to all sorts of limitations, diseases, and deviant impulses. “The carnal mind,” reads Romans 8:7, “*is enmity against God*.” For Baldwin, this self-hatred was further reinforced by his race and sexual orientation. Everything about him was wrong.

The beauty of the pulpit, Baldwin writes, was that it allowed him, at least for a fleeting moment, to feel cleansed. He could temporarily deny his flesh, abandon his impure thoughts, and find acceptance. “I threw all my anguish and terror into my sermons,” he writes, recognizing in retrospect that “the salvation I was preaching to others was fueled by the hope of my own.”⁵⁷ But in the end, after the service was done, “nothing was obliterated: I was still a boy in trouble with himself and the streets around him.”⁵⁸ Baldwin ultimately decided to leave the pulpit and the

Church, he writes, because “I did not want to become a liar. I did not want my love to become manipulation. I did not want my fear of my own desires to transform itself into power—into power, precisely, over those who feared and were therefore at the mercy of their own desires.”⁵⁹

Such a revelation seemed never to have occurred to those who made up the modern religious right—or perhaps it had occurred to them, but they made a different calculation. Nearly all of the issues that animated the Christian right were rooted in fear and hatred of the body, from homosexuality, to pornography, to women’s liberation, to AIDS. “AIDS is not just God’s punishment for homosexuals,” proclaimed Jerry Falwell. “It is God’s punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.”⁶⁰ Not so coincidentally, it was nearly always “sins of the flesh” that surfaced in the scandals of shamed ministers and televangelists, some of whom ultimately turned on and blackmailed each other. Due to this blatant discrepancy between their actions and words, writes Baldwin, “I cannot take seriously—not, at least, as Christian ministers—the present day gang that calls itself the Moral Majority, or its tongue-speaking relatives such as follow the Right Reverend Robertson.”⁶¹ He could not take them seriously, that is, because of how clearly their gospel of sexual repression and fear of the body was a projection of power rather than a genuine personal commitment. Moreover, Baldwin found the sexless, Puritan gospel theologically and historically bankrupt. The scriptural Jesus, he contends, had nothing much to say about carnality. His sermons on sexuality do not exist, nor does his condemnation of women controlling their own bodies. “Not one of the present-day white fundamentalist preachers would have had the humility, the courage, the sheer presence of mind to have said to the mob surrounding the woman taken in adultery, ‘He that is without sin, let him first cast a stone,’ or the depth of perception that informs ‘Neither do I condemn thee: Go, and sin no more.’”⁶² The scriptural Jesus, in other words, did not condemn the body.

Baldwin traces the division between flesh and spirit back to the apostle Paul, whom, as Josiah Ulysses Young notes, “Baldwin dislikes more than any other Biblical figure.”⁶³ Young elaborates: “For Baldwin, the [alabaster Lord’s] power has to do with Paul’s classical distinction between the flesh and the spirit. The former is to sin as the latter is to grace. Given that ancient dualism, white American Protestants, Baldwin asserts, have thought that the black body has been to the flesh as the white body has been to the spirit.”⁶⁴ This critique is crucial to Baldwin’s alternative gospel: not only does he see a harmful division between body and spirit, as did, for example, the Romantic poet William Blake (a writer who Craig Werner persuasively documents as sharing some striking theological similarities with Baldwin);⁶⁵ he also recognizes the racial prisms of body and spirit—the ways, that is, in which racialized bodies come to signify this duality.⁶⁶ As cultural scholar Richard Dyer puts it, “To represent people is to represent bodies.”⁶⁷ In Western culture, such representations are always already racialized: black people are often reduced to the corporal—the “race” of their bodies—while white people are often raceless, colorless, universal, transcendent. A black author is described as a black author while a white author is simply called an author. To be white is to be pure,

clean, and innocent, while to be black is to be defiled, corrupt, marked. It is this mythology that underpins D. W. Griffith's influential film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which enacts on screen a kind of cosmic war against the black body. For Griffith, the black body is portrayed as corrupting or defiling the white body—particularly the body of the angelic white woman. The myth of the black male as corporal, sexual beast and the white woman as ethereal victim remains one of the most persistent, deeply embedded terrors in American culture.⁶⁸

These intersections of religion, race, gender, and sexuality, writes Baldwin, “are fearfully entangled in the guts of this nation, so profoundly that to speak of the one is to conjure up the other. One cannot speak of sin without referring to blackness, and blackness stalks our history and our streets.”⁶⁹ Playing on such myths and fears, indeed, was the purpose of the infamous Willie Horton advertisement in 1988, one year after Baldwin's essay was published. The commercial was orchestrated by Republican strategists Lee Atwater and Roger Ailes and actively supported by the religious right. Before running the ad, George H. W. Bush was running 17 points behind his opponent, former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis. The ad, however, proved disturbingly effective. Not only would it portray Dukakis as soft on crime; it would effectively exploit the specter of race. Horton, who was serving a life sentence for murder, was out of prison via Dukakis's furlough program, during which time he raped a white woman. Horton became the embodiment of America's fears about black men. His image was darkened to accentuate what he was intended to conjure: fear, rape, violence, and corruption. As Susan Estrich, Dukakis's campaign manager, writes: “There is no stronger metaphor for racial hatred in our country than the black man raping the white woman. If you were going to run a campaign of fear and smear and appeal to racial hatred you could not have picked a better case to use than this one.”⁷⁰ Bush ended up winning the 1988 election by a landslide.

While in theory, all flesh—all bodies—were at odds with the spirit according to traditional Christian theology, then, Baldwin recognized that *black bodies* were particular targets of both the state and Christianity. Indeed, these institutions often worked hand-in-hand to perpetuate the devaluation of the black body. Consequently, what the actions and obsessions of the political and religious right reveal more than anything, Baldwin contends, is a desire for *control*. Like their ancestors, many white Christians believe they must define, police, and control black bodies for the good of society. He compares the ministers of the religious right to deputies he encountered throughout America. “They both believe they are responsible . . . to define and privileged to impose law and order; and both, historically and actually, know that law and order are meant to keep me in my place.”⁷¹

The need to repress and control the body—particularly the body of the other—results in many grotesque and dangerous outcomes for black and white alike. For one, writes Baldwin, it makes “the possibility of the private life as fugitive as that of a fleeing nigger.”⁷² Yet it also results in a kind of psychological slavery. Hating the body means hating oneself; violence against the body is also violence against

oneself. As a former preacher, Baldwin recalls its effects even on the minister preaching fire and damnation. “Joy was not even, to judge from the endless empty plain behind their eyes, a memory. And they could recognize, in others, joy or the possibility of joy only as a mighty threat—as something, as they put it, obscene.”⁷³ In a strange counterintuitive reversal, that is, religion taught its members to fear joy and pleasure, to hate the body, to view intimate contact as a threat.

Ultimately, Baldwin concluded that such a belief system could not be his home. “My salvation could not be achieved that way,” he writes.⁷⁴ Upon leaving church one day—his last day—he remembers an old white woman from his congregation pulling him aside and warning of the eternal torment that awaited boys like him. “Her face and her eyes seemed purple,” he writes. “Her lips seemed to be chewing and spitting out the air . . . And, all the time, her grip on my arm tightened.”⁷⁵ Love had nothing to do with such an encounter, Baldwin writes. “The motive was buried deep within that woman, the decomposing corpse of her human possibilities fouling the air.”⁷⁶ This description—the decomposing corpse of her human possibilities fouling the air—can be interpreted as Baldwin’s symbolic embodiment of the moral outcomes of the religious right. It was a gospel based on fear, rejection, and exclusion. Yet as Baldwin writes:

Those ladders to fire—the burning of the witch, the heretic, the Jew, the nigger, the faggot—have always failed to redeem, or even to change in any way whatever, the mob. They merely epiphanize and force their connection on the only plain on which the mob can meet: the charred bones connect its members and give them a reason to speak to one another, for the charred bones are the sum total of their individual self-hatred, externalized.⁷⁷

Baldwin’s alternative gospel had to do with re-examining assumptions about the body and desire. If William Blake’s theology married heaven and hell, Baldwin’s reunited body and spirit.⁷⁸ “True to his credo,” writes Josiah Ulysses Young, “he rejects any ‘God’ that would cause him, or anybody else, to put down the flesh and lift up the spirit, thus tearing the two asunder.”⁷⁹ While the religious right marked, policed, and condemned the body, Baldwin retorts that “sin is not limited to carnal activity, nor are the sins of the flesh the most crucial or reverberating of our sins.”⁸⁰ Sin, for Baldwin, goes deeper than the flesh. “Carnal activity” can be grotesque, mundane, or sublime. For sex to be sacred, it must be about genuine, reciprocal connection. Thus, “salvation,” for Baldwin, “is not flight from the wrath of God. Salvation is not separation. It is the beginning of union with all that is or has been or will ever be.”⁸¹ This is Baldwin’s gospel of love. Douglas Field clarifies that the author’s emphasis on love is not to be confused with sentimentality, which Baldwin abhorred.⁸² Love, for Baldwin, was an active spiritual and political force, “something more like a fire . . . something which can change you.”⁸³ Love did not deny the body or sexuality; it embraced it. “Rather than transfiguring the religious into the sexual,” writes Field, “Baldwin urges his readers to examine what is generally held sacred. This entails, far from a repudiation of the sacred, a need to accept

the sensual side of religion.”⁸⁴ Baldwin’s “new spirituality,” thus, includes all bodies and all forms of love, including homosexual love.⁸⁵

Such a revision of traditional Christianity compels one to interrogate the language used to describe the sinner or transgressor. The meaning of the word “transgressor,” argues Baldwin, is much different than we suppose. His reassessment of the label’s true meaning was, he writes, the “key to [his] journey through the Bible.”⁸⁶ This reappraisal begins by understanding that transgressors, in many cases, are the *moral minority*. Jesus, Baldwin reminds, was one such transgressor, as were many of the people with whom he surrounded himself. Historically, Baldwin argues, “transgressors” include those who opposed Hitler in Germany; they include Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. To transgress, that is, can be a courageous and *moral* act. It is a society’s minorities, not the majority, who so frequently act as its conscience.

Whether Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and the religious right did in fact represent a majority of Americans is debatable. But certainly the worldview they espoused—Manichean, militaristic, capitalist, white, heteronormative, suspicious, and at times outrightly violent toward difference—was carried triumphantly in two landslide elections for Ronald Reagan. Like Foucault, Baldwin recognized that power was not simply enacted by the government or the Church or any other institution; rather, it was deeply embedded in all aspects of society. Foucault used the term *episteme* to describe a set of assumptions, ideas, attitudes, and procedures that construct our reality in a given culture and time.⁸⁷ The episteme determines what is moral and immoral, and who is normal and abnormal. In this way, the language of the religious right represented the dominant *episteme* of the Reagan era. In political parlance, it controlled the narrative.

The religious right’s power and influence, however, did not make it moral. Morality required a willingness to challenge tradition, power, and authority; it required unpopular “disturbers of the peace” and visionary “transgressors.” As Baldwin put it in his 1962 essay, “The Creative Process”: “Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover’s war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation, make freedom real.”⁸⁸ For Baldwin, the Moral Majority, replete with Thou Shalt Not’s, Scarlet A’s, and repressed desires, represented an easier, less evolved understanding of morality and salvation. It demanded fear and condemnation. But to condemn the other, he writes, “obliterates the possibility of salvation, since condemnation is fueled by terror and self-hatred.”⁸⁹ This is the destructive epistemic loop—on the individual and society—of traditional organized religion: there must always be queer, threatening bodies to justify one’s own righteous, superior identity. By contrast, writes Baldwin, in perhaps the most eloquent encapsulation of his alternative theology,

Salvation is as real, as mighty, and as impersonal as the rain, and it is yet as private as the rain on one’s face. It is never accomplished; it is to be reaffirmed every day and every hour. There is absolutely no salvation without love: this is the wheel in the

middle of the wheel. Salvation does not divide. Salvation connects, so that one sees oneself in others and others in oneself. It is not the exclusive property of any dogma, creed, or church. It keeps the channel open between oneself and however one wishes to name That which is greater than oneself. It has absolutely nothing to do with one's circumstances in one's passage through this world. It is a mighty fortress, even in the teeth of ruin or at the gates of death.⁹⁰

Salvation, that is, is not achieved in some distant heaven through the verdict of some scrutinizing deity. It is not achieved by escaping damnation or being cleansed of one's desires or sins. Rather, it comes through intimacy, love, and connection, through "seeing oneself in others and others in oneself."⁹¹ For Baldwin, if we are saved, finally, it will not be by God, but by each other.

Notes

- 1 Joanna Brooks, "From Edwards to Baldwin: Heterodoxy, Discontinuity, and New Narratives of American Religious-Literary History," *Early American Literature*, 45:2 (2010), p. 432.
- 2 Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 82–6.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 4 James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 308.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 309–10.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- 7 Douglas Field astutely notes that it is the music of the Church, more than the Church itself, that becomes Baldwin's preferred vehicle for "anti-institutional spirituality" (*All Those Strangers*, p. 95).
- 8 Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," p. 306.
- 9 Baldwin's connection to the Black Church remained characterized by paradox. See, for example, Christopher Hobson's essay, "Prophecy and Doubt in *Just Above My Head*," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 67–90, in which the author details how Baldwin sustains "both the possible falseness of prophetic hope and our continuing need for it, and to present the necessity for choice in a final dream that holds the key to the novel's meaning" (p. 67).
- 10 James Baldwin, "Open Letter to the Born Again," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 784.
- 11 While the religious right and the Moral Majority have sometimes been used interchangeably, the former describes a coalition of like-minded, largely but not exclusively evangelical Christian groups focused on conservative political efforts, while the latter initially referred to a specific political action group founded in 1979 by Jerry Falwell. As time, passed, however, the Moral Majority came to be identified more broadly with the same basic coalition and ideological concerns as the religious right.
- 12 James Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Vintage, 2010), p. 204.
- 13 Lauren F. Winner, "Reaganizing Religion: Changing Political and Cultural Norms

- Among Evangelicals in Ronald Reagan's America," in Gil Troy and Vincent J. Cannato (eds.), *Living in the Eighties* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 181.
- 14 Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," 3 November 1969, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2303> (accessed 8 September 2016).
- 15 "Born Again! The Evangelicals," *Newsweek*, 25 October 1976.
- 16 Baldwin, "Open Letter to the Born Again," pp. 768–9.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 769.
- 18 "Playboy Interview, 1976," in Don Richardson (ed.), *Conversations with Carter* (London, Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1998), p. 58.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 20 Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 64.
- 21 Miller notes one simple but significant rhetorical transformation that began in the 1980s under the influence of the religious right: "A commonplace in presidential discourse at the start of the twenty-first century, 'God bless America' appeared in a major presidential address precisely once before Reagan" (*ibid.*, p. 65). It is now, of course, an expected conclusion to many presidential speeches, conservative and liberal alike.
- 22 Matthew Avery Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013), p. 1.
- 23 Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 159.
- 24 In one show, Robertson spoke to a member of CBN's board of directors, Harald Bredesen, about the "anointing" of Ronald Reagan. Bredesen claimed that he had joined hands with Pat Boone, George Otis, and Ronald Reagan in prayer in 1970 when Reagan was governor of California, when Otis suddenly received a prophecy that God would make Reagan president if "he would walk in his ways" (Winner, "Reaganizing Religion," p. 188).
- 25 Pat Robertson, "Action Plan for the 1980s," in Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right*, pp. 119–20.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 119–22.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 28 Winner, "Reaganizing Religion," p. 188.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 184. Ironically, this seemingly apolitical sermon was a direct attack on Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and civil rights efforts in Selma, Alabama. "If as much effort could be put into winning people to Jesus Christ across the land as is being exerted in the present civil rights movement," said Falwell, "America would be turned upside down for God" (Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right*, p. 12).
- 30 Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 177.
- 31 Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right*, p. 12.
- 32 George Wallace, "Segregation Now, Segregation Forever," 14 January 1963, <http://www.blackpast.org/1963-george-wallace-segregation-now-segregation-forever>.
- 33 As Republican strategist Lee Atwater put it in an infamous 1981 recording: "You start out in 1954 by saying, 'Nigger, nigger, nigger.' By 1968 you can't say 'nigger'— that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying

- that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, 'We want to cut this,' is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than 'Nigger, nigger'" (Rick Perlstein, "Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy," *Nation*, 13 November 2012).
- 34 Doug Banwart, "Jerry Falwell, the Rise of the Moral Majority, and the 1980 Election," *Western Illinois Historical Review*, 5 (2013), p. 146.
- 35 Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism*, p. 63. Miller elaborates: "Falwell's influence may have been even greater on Reagan's re-election: November 1984, even more than November 1980, was Falwell's moment in the sun. Every national news network was on hand in Lynchburg to record his response to the election. A leading newsmagazine soon rated him the fourteenth most influential person in the nation (third in the private sector, behind businessman Lee Iacocca and newscaster Dan Rather). Falwell was a persistent and savvy media presence. He demonstrated how the Christian Right could shape public discussions even without achieving clear policy victories. With the help of speechwriter Cal Thomas, Falwell evinced a knack for quips that were simultaneously provocative and disarming. When confronted by gay-rights supporters, Falwell voiced the emerging conservative truism, 'God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!' Those 'main-line' Protestants who chafed at such lines were now on the 'sidelines' of relevance" (*ibid.*, p. 68).
- 36 William H. Swatos, "Televangelism," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* (London, AltaMira Press, 1998), p. 513.
- 37 "The Tech Boom," *The Eighties*, Season 1, Episode 7, CNN (2016).
- 38 "Greed is Good," *The Eighties*, Season 1, Episode 4, CNN (2016).
- 39 Emily Johnson, "A Theme Park, a Scandal, and the Faded Ruins of a Televangelism Empire," *Religion & Politics*, 28 October 2014, par. 1.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 "Greed is Good," *The Eighties*, Season 1, Episode 4, CNN (2016).
- 43 With increased media scrutiny about the Bakkers' opulent lifestyle—which included gold-plated bathroom fixtures, Rolls Royces, an air-conditioned dog house, and luxurious vacations—a federal investigation ensued about the Bakkers' financial affairs. Eventually, Jim Bakker was indicted on 24 charges, including fraud and conspiracy. He was convicted on all counts in 1988, and sentenced to forty-five years in prison, although he ended up serving just five years due, in part, to a campaign led by his son, Jay, asking the parole board for leniency based on his father's rehabilitation. Meanwhile, Jerry Falwell, who had become a mortal enemy of Bakker's, took over PTL, including Heritage USA. See Richard Ostling, "Of God and Greed," *Time*, 24 June 2001.
- 44 See *Time's* 2006 cover story, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" for a detailed exploration of how the "electric church" and "prosperity gospel" evolved in the 2000s. David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?," *Time*, 10 September 2006.
- 45 Baldwin, "Open Letter to the Born Again," p. 784.
- 46 Vincent J. Cannato, "Bright Lights, Doomed Cities: The Rise or Fall of New York City in the 1980s," in Gil Troy and Vincent J. Cannato (eds.), *Living in the Eighties* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 70–82.
- 47 James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York, Owl Books, 1996), p. 124.

- 48 *Wall Street*, dir. by Oliver Stone, 1987, 20th Century Fox, 2010, DVD.
- 49 Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent," p. 199.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 51 "Mountains of blasphemous rhetoric have been written to deny or defend this fact," writes Baldwin ("To Crush the Serpent," p. 195).
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- 53 Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," p. 309.
- 54 Field, "James Baldwin's Religion," pp. 86–9.
- 55 Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," p. 311.
- 56 Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent," p. 196.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- 60 Hans Johnson and William Eskridge, "The Legacy of Falwell's Bully Pulpit," *Washington Post*, 19 May 2007, par. 8.
- 61 Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent," p. 198.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 63 Josiah Ulysses Young, *James Baldwin's Understanding of God: Overwhelming Desire and Joy* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 14. "The real architect of the Christian church," Baldwin asserted, "was not the disreputable, sun-baked Hebrew who gave it his name but the mercilessly fanatical and self-righteous St. Paul" ("The Fire Next Time," p. 312).
- 64 Young, *James Baldwin's Understanding of God*, p. 14.
- 65 Craig Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 223–35.
- 66 As early as his 1949 essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin was contesting fears surrounding the flesh—particularly the black body. Most commonly, the black body was represented as dangerous, threatening, or corrupt. Yet Baldwin also took issue with Harriet Beecher Stowe's deification of Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "His triumph," writes Baldwin of Tom, "is metaphysical, unearthly; since he is black, born without the light, it is only through humility, the incessant mortification of the flesh, that he can enter into communion with God or man . . . only thus could she herself be delivered from ever-present sin, only thus could she bury, as St. Paul demanded, 'the carnal man, the man of the flesh.' Tom, therefore, her only black man, has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex." James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 14.
- 67 Richard Dyer, *White* (New York, Routledge, 1997), p. 14.
- 68 As Richard Dyer writes: "There are special anxieties surrounding the whiteness of white women vis-à-vis sexuality. As the literal bearers of children, and because they are held primarily responsible for their initial raising, women are the indispensable means by which the group—the race—is in every sense reproduced . . . White women thus carry—or, in many narratives, betray—the hopes, achievements and character of the race" (*White*, p. 29).
- 69 Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent," p. 200.
- 70 Qtd. in Roger Simon, "The GOP and Willie Horton: Together Again," *Politico*, 19 May 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/05/jeb-bush-willie-horton-118061> (accessed 8 September 2016).

- 71 Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent," p. 199.
 72 *Ibid.*, p. 200.
 73 *Ibid.*
 74 *Ibid.*
 75 *Ibid.*, p. 201.
 76 *Ibid.*
 77 *Ibid.*, p. 204.
 78 William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (1790), in Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (eds.), *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2008), pp. 66–82.
 79 Young, *James Baldwin's Understanding of God*, p. 14.
 80 Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent," p. 203.
 81 *Ibid.*, p. 203.
 82 "Love," explains Baldwin, "does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up." James Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 220.
 83 Field, *All Those Strangers*, p. 96.
 84 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
 85 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
 86 Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent," p. 202.
 87 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, Vintage, 1994), pp. 178–80.
 88 James Baldwin, "The Creative Process," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 672.
 89 *Ibid.*, p. 204.
 90 *Ibid.*, pp. 203–4.
 91 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

Works Cited

- Baldwin, James, "The Creative Process," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 669–72.
 ——— "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 11–18.
 ——— *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York, Owl Books, 1996).
 ——— "The Fire Next Time," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 291–347.
 ——— *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York, Dial Press, 1981).
 ——— *Just Above My Head* (New York, Delta Trade Press, 1979).
 ——— "Open Letter to the Born Again," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 784–7.
 ——— "An Open Letter to Jimmy Carter," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 766–9.
 ——— "To Crush the Serpent" (1987), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Vintage, 2010), pp. 195–204.
 Banwart, Doug, "Jerry Falwell, the Rise of the Moral Majority, and the 1980 Election," *Western Illinois Historical Review*, 5 (2013), pp. 133–57.
 Blake, William, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (1790), in Mary Lynn Johnson and

- John E. Grant (eds.), *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2008), pp. 66–82.
- Brooks, Joanna, "From Edwards to Baldwin: Heterodoxy, Discontinuity, and New Narratives of American Religious-Literary History," *Early American Literature*, 45:2 (2010), pp. 425–40.
- Cannato, Vincent J., "Bright Lights, Doomed Cities: The Rise or Fall of New York City in the 1980s," in Gil Troy and Vincent J. Cannato (eds.), *Living in the Eighties* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 70–82.
- Carenen, Caitlin, *The Fervent Embrace: Liberal Protestants, Evangelicals, and Israel* (New York, NYU Press, 2012).
- Carter, Jimmy, "Playboy Interview, 1976," in Don Richardson (ed.), *Conversations with Carter* (London, Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1998), pp. 33–58.
- Dyer, Richard, *White* (New York, Routledge, 1997).
- Field, Douglas, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).
- Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, Vintage, 1994).
- "Greed is Good," *The Eighties*, Season 1, Episode 4, CNN (2016).
- Hardy, Clarence E., III, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, God, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville, TN, University of Tennessee Press, 2003).
- Hobson, Christopher, "Prophecy and Doubt in *Just Above My Head*," *James Baldwin Review*, 1:1 (2015), pp. 67–90.
- Johnson, Emily, "A Theme Park, a Scandal, and the Faded Ruins of a Televangelism Empire," *Religion & Politics*, 28 October 2014.
- Johnson, Hans, and William Eskridge, "The Legacy of Falwell's Bully Pulpit," *Washington Post*, 19 May 2007.
- Miller, Steven P., *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Ostling, Richard N., "Of God and Greed," *Time*, 24 June 2001.
- Perlstein, Rick, "Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy," *Nation*, 13 November 2012.
- Simon, Roger, "The GOP and Willie Horton: Together Again," *Politico*, 19 May 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/05/jeb-bush-willie-horton-118061> (accessed 8 September 2016).
- Sutton, Matthew Avery, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013).
- Swatos, William H., "Televangelism," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* (London, AltaMira Press, 1998), pp. 513–18.
- "The Tech Boom," *The Eighties*, Season 1, Episode 7, CNN (2016).
- Van Biema, David, and Jeff Chu, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?," *Time*, 10 September 2006.
- Werner, Craig, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 223–35.
- Williams, Daniel K., *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Winner, Lauren F., "Reaganizing Religion: Changing Political and Cultural Norms Among Evangelicals in Ronald Reagan's America," in Gil Troy and Vincent J. Cannato (eds.), *Living in the Eighties* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 181–98.

Young, Josiah Ulysses, *James Baldwin's Understanding of God: Overwhelming Desire and Joy* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Contributor's Biography

Joseph Vogel is an Assistant Professor at Merrimack College, where his research and teaching interests include contemporary American literature, film, popular music, and popular culture. He is the author of *Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson* (2011) and the forthcoming monograph, *James Baldwin and the 1980s: Witnessing the Reagan Era* (University of Illinois Press).