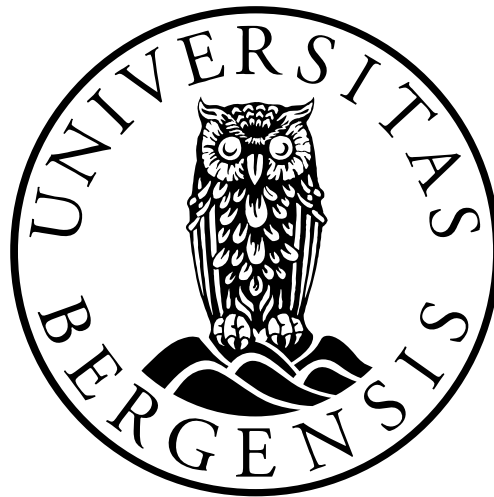


Between the Threshing Floor and the
Amen Corner: James Baldwin's Search for
Love in Religion

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Norwegian Abstract

Hvordan fremstilles kirken og religiøs tro i James Baldwins tidlige forfatterskap? Det er utgangspunktet for denne masteroppgaven. Historisk sett har religion hatt en viktig rolle både som sosialt lim i afroamerikanske miljøer- og som verktøy for å rettferdiggjøre rasisme. I denne oppgaven undersøker jeg fremstillinger av religiøs tro og fellesskap i romanen *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, teaterstykket *The Amen Corner* og i brevsamlingen *The Fire Next Time*. De tre tekstene presenterer ulike religionsuttrykk og illustrerer også endringene i Baldwins personlige syn på religion. Ved å se disse fremstillingene i den historiske konteksten de ble skrevet i samt ta i bruk religionsvitenskapelig teori om religiøs atferd viser jeg at Baldwins fremstillinger av religion preges av historiske og nyere tolkninger som «black theology». Hans feiring av disse sosiale og kulturelle funksjonene illustrerer forfatteren sin åpenhet for en reformulering av kristendommen. Samtidig retter han oppmerksomheten mot den ødeleggende effekten religion har på enkeltpersoner som av ulike grunner ikke følger kirkens strenge regelverk. I stedet søker han et mer nyansert sett med normer som baserer seg på kjærlighet heller enn ortodokse ideer om hva som er “rett” og “galt”. Sist, men ikke minst viser jeg at Baldwin i stor grad vektlegger afroamerikanernes sosiale stilling i sine beskrivelser av religion og religiøse fellesskap. Stor sosial nød gir sterk motivasjon til å inngå i fellesskap med andre- og med Gud. Denne nøden gjør at det å ha, med Baldwins øyne, en “ekte” tilknytning til religion blir komplisert.

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Introduction

Religion, Christianity in particular, has been profoundly influential in the history of the United States of America; more specifically, in the complicated relationship between black and white Americans. Introduced by white colonial powers, Christianity began to play an important social and political role in the U.S. during the seventeenth century. However, throughout American history, some of the country's white protestant groups exploited the arena that was supposed to show equality, and obtained and justified their dominant position in the hierarchy on the idea of God-sent actions and wealth (Bradford 1983, 19). In that capacity, they were also able to define non-Christians and non-white Christians as inferior to themselves. This negligent use of power has also entailed an adoption of biblical stories to dehumanize Africans, thus justifying their own perception of chattel slavery and subsequent oppression. The historical and social role of religion in the U.S. is important because it demonstrates the political position religion held and the ways it imposed degrading identities onto people who were often forced to convert to Christianity.

Religious beliefs also provided alternative channels to bring about social status and support to groups who were deemed inferior (Bartkowski and Matthews 2006, 166). African American groups adopted Christianity as a strategy for resistance towards oppression and implemented a sense of being "self-determining agents" (West and Glaude Jr. 2003, xx). This feeling of agency was also underlined by conversion and rituals of salvation, which proved that God chose to save and take care of them. As a way of committing to God, they also adopted biblical stories to speak to their own situation (Lackey 2009, 581). This use of biblical analogy and feeling of being chosen by God connected them to the Israelites in Egypt (West and Glaude Jr. 2003, xxi). Similarly to how God had protected the Jewish population from the Pharaoh in the biblical myth, they hoped that he would eventually protect black Americans too. The idea of God as savior also influenced spirituals, and music became a

substantial part of the church experience (Mays 2010, 25). As a result, the spirituals, hymns, sacred songs, and gospel music developed into significant contributions to the establishment of the cultural role of the churches.

In addition to the cultural aspects of their services, the church also holds an impactful social role. In the northern “store-front” churches, in particular, this social role implies a structure and attachment similar to that of a family. The name “store-front” refers to the physical trait of the churches that appeared as a response to rural black migrants traveling to northern states at the start of the twentieth century (Baer and Singer 2003, 518-19). Faced with oppression, poverty, and violence, the churches created a place to gather in prayer and shared experiences. An example of these store-front churches is the Pentecostal church communities. These Pentecostal churches are a part of what Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya refer to as “the Black Church” (1990, 1). The scholars use this term as a sociological and theological collective reference to the various denominations of black Christian churches in the U.S. (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 1). Pentecostalism emphasizes the Holy Spirit and salvation, which members express in signs and wonders like speaking in tongues (glossolalia), prophecy, healing, and exorcisms (Woodhead 2001, 174). Their services encourage untrained ministers, who allow participation by women and children (Field 2008, 441). The Christian denomination derives from parts of the holiness movement which focuses on early Christianity together with music and spirituals from Africana religious traditions (Synan 1997, 112). Combining these features establishes the northern black store-front Pentecostal church communities as a distinct cultural and social arena. These small, interactive, and inclusive services came to support the idea of a family structure. Being connected as a family creates an added intimacy and commitment, making the churches a great priority.

Black culture and traditions played a significant role in the way people practiced religion, and in return, religion came to influence black cultural expression. Accordingly,

there appears to be a profound amount of African American literature that encompasses issues like theological beliefs, the Black Church, and the experience of a religious service. The cultural expression entails that many authors and artists would embrace the idea of an upcoming freedom similar to the Jewish population's departure from Egypt (Mays 2010, 25). On the other side, different authors, like Frederick Douglass, challenged the complicated history of both black and white Christianity (2017). Douglass' 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, details the hypocrisy of Christian slave masters. Since then, Christianity and the Black Church have remained key in fiction, religious narratives, and on the political arena.

Despite the emergence of new denominations like Pentecostalism in the north, the "secularized" Harlem Renaissance showed that God was "either absent from artistic expression or mentioned [...] with reverence" (O'Neale 1988, 128). Despite the rise of secularism and other ideological claims in literature in the 1920s and 1930s, the political arena remained engaged with biblical allusions, like that of Jesus championing oppressed groups (Savage 2000, 381). The issue of religion was re-introduced in 2015 by Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, thus proving that the negotiation between religious benefits and disadvantages continued playing an important role in black culture and life in the twenty-first century. The musical experience of the Black Church still has a significant cultural influence, so much so that the last five years have seen gospel and church music by mainstream artists and Sunday service-concerts in popular culture (Weingarten 2016; Nguyen 2019).

This leads us to James Baldwin, who remains occupied with the issue of religion throughout his literary career. With a background as a Pentecostal preacher in a small congregation, Baldwin demonstrates significant reflections on the connection between religious behavior and faith, racism, power, and culture. For this reason, I approach Baldwin's

works by focusing on cultural elements, and, more specifically, on how culture is influenced by history and religion. In doing so, I employ ideas, knowledge, and frameworks from theological and religious studies, as well as American history. Together, these considerations invite a critical and cultural approach to Baldwin's reflections on religion in his literary output.

Although Baldwin has officially left the Pentecostal church of his younger years, he explores his changing views on the issue of religious practices and beliefs in published works, recorded conversations, and speeches throughout his career. Because of his changing perspective on religion and the issues intertwining with this vast concept, I do not rely on his affiliation with religious institutions as a signifier of his ambiguous attitude to religion. Instead, I find it more productive to use a broader cultural approach to properly consider Baldwin's complex and ambiguous relationship to religion in his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (hereafter *Mountain*) from 1953, the play *The Amen Corner* (hereafter *Amen*) from 1954, and the personal essays in *The Fire Next Time* (hereafter *Fire*) from 1963.

I have chosen these three works because they demonstrate different aspects of religious experience, and arguably illustrate Baldwin's ideological transformation while shedding light on his religiosity. Moreover, the thesis presents his changing expectations of religious institutions, religious people, and God. While I examine Baldwin's presentations of religion, I also briefly explore his personal religious commitment, and in doing so, I use the term "religiosity" in the sense of individual and collective commitment to a system of beliefs (Sherkat 2015, 377-78). Baldwin's presentation of religion depicts the social and historical role of racism and black culture, and the focus on these features is arguably crucial to understanding the complexity of religion in *Mountain*, *Amen*, and *Fire*.

As a response to religious and political forces, Baldwin frequently uses love as an ethical stance, making it a vital issue in the three works. Moreover, my reading of *Mountain*,

Amen, and *Fire* emphasizes Baldwin's use of love as a personal philosophy and priority. This focus raises the question about what his notion of love includes. The scholars Jenny James and Joseph Drexler-Dreis briefly explore the aspects of "eros" and "agape" in Baldwin's body of work (2012; 2015). I also employ these terms to explain my view of Baldwin's love. Anders Nygren follows Martin Luther's inclusion of agape and introduces the two terms together in his twentieth century ethical reflection on love (1953). The terms appear to stand in contrast to each other due to their different backgrounds from ancient Greek philosophers and Christian thought. Still, they are often intertwined, and, therefore, also challenging to distinguish (Grant 1996, 4). In addition to eros and agape, "philia" and "storge" describe the love between friends and families. The first term, Eros, explains a love that inhabits romance and desire, and while *Mountain* suggests this type of love, I do not explore the nature of this romantic relationship in a religious context. As a juxtaposition, agape happens because God reaches out to humans to make them love others (Grant 1996, 4). Agape testifies to the good in people and their ability to love everyone because God loves them – if a person inhabits faith, they will love their peers, whether they receive love in return. The idea of agape becomes significant for my thesis because it encompasses such broad compassion and exists as a religious idea.

If we look at the Bible, it presents many expressions of love. There is also an overall emphasis on the necessity of love as a consequence of obeying God or as a method of following the example of Jesus. A demonstration of the former is John's first epistle in the King James Bible, which suggests that agape means that God is love, "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love" (1 John 4:8). Nevertheless, Paul's letters tell people to love as Jesus did, and specifically, Galatians 5:14 repeats the commandments about the need for people to love their neighbors. The Matthew gospel also commands people to love their neighbor in 22:39, and 5:44-7 also instructs people to love their enemies. John Corrigan even

summarizes every commandment with the idea from Romans 12-14, that loving one's neighbor cannot hurt anyone, and consequently, it is the answer to everything (1998, 268). Approaching the signs of a biblical background to Baldwin's love, Chapter Two refers specifically to these ideas of applying love because of God's love and meeting enemies with love.

Although agape differs from brotherly love, because its premise is on God's love, James introduces agape to the theological and political opinion of Martin Luther King Jr. and uses it in the context of brotherly love (2012, 44). I will follow a similar path as James, thus separating "universal-" and "personal love". While agape and the notion of brotherly love could apply to both categorizations of love, I aim to distinguish these based on Baldwin's literary focus. Universal love aligns with the biblical scriptures calling to love everyone, even in the face of hate, and thus portray love as a mode of compassion. However, Baldwin's love does not necessarily derive from the Bible. I classify personal love, which might include *philia*, *storge*, and *eros*, as the love between two people, whether it is familial or romantic. In *Mountain*, *Amen*, and *Fire* personal love occurs in instances when love transcends one's priority of the church. In some cases, I specify the love that exists entirely outside the church that does not seem to follow the Christian doctrine of love as an "earthly-" or "humanistic love".

The hate and racism by white actors offer a stark contrast to the concept of love. This contrast is particularly evident in *Fire* when circumstances force Baldwin to love in the face of hate. In addition to the descriptions of violent racism by white counterparts, *Mountain* and *Amen* put considerable weight on the congregation's hateful actions. Nevertheless, when the congregations fail to apply love and the churches put restrictions on loving relationships, personal love becomes essential. The types of love are very often intertwined, and there is not always a clear distinction. An example of this uncertainty can be found in the instances where

the characters apply a brotherly love both to family members and strangers. However, in general terms, a personal love applies to more intimate relationships, whereas a universal love refers to an unlimited compassion for everybody. Baldwin's idea of love is often prioritized over religion, even though the background for his love suggests a religious presence.

I approach his attitude towards religious communities and beliefs by emphasizing cultural and social context together with theological aspects. Reading studies on Baldwin's oeuvre, I have noticed that a considerable number of scholars explore the issues of racism, black culture, and religion separately. Alternatively, some analyze the status of his religious commitment or consider his relationship with religion an element of the past. In my view, the most crucial factor of Baldwin's view on religion is the connection between Christianity in the U.S. and the history of racism and black culture. I argue that Baldwin demonstrates how religion is used to both support and oppress black people. His description of the church gives a broad portrayal of the distinct cultural elements like music and preaching, as well as its manipulations. To unpack his portrayal of religion, I will make use of W.E.B. Du Bois' racialized approach to religion (2000c). This means that I follow the notion that religion always intersects with other social phenomena such as race relations.

Du Bois' reflection on the role of the church is often referred to as a "dual capacity" or "dualism", which refers to his inclusion of the positive and negative features of institutionalized religion. This understanding implies hypocritical interpretations of Christianity while exemplifying what he refers to as "amusement" (Zuckerman 2000, 8). His short story "Will the church Remove the Color Line?" explains white Christian actors' role in slavery and its aftermath, and argues that Christian groups defend oppression of black Americans (Du Bois 2000c, 174-77). Du Bois' emphasis on unfavorable features does not necessarily oppose Christianity, but instead the way Christians engage with their religion. Nevertheless, Du Bois' "The Problem with Amusement" and "Of the Faith of the Fathers" in

The Souls of Black Folks explore the positive social elements inside the church (2000b, a). The former underlines the role the church holds as it gathers people to practice religion and experience amusement in all forms (Du Bois 2000b, 21). Likewise, “Of the Faith of the Fathers” describes one of Du Bois’ experiences in the church, where he was fascinated by the preaching, music, frenzy, presence of history, and spirituals (2000a, 48). However, the text also concerns issues with the Black Church. Du Bois refers to the initial teachings of Christianity among slaves as “passive submission” (2000a, 52), and questions the more recent “cold, fashionable devotees” (2000a, 56) who gathered in churches similar to businesses and avoided unpleasant questions. I think Du Bois texts provide a useful approach to the various experiences the church enacts. By acknowledging the white churches’ policies, together with the joy and passivity of the Black Church, we can understand why it creates such a consuming and complicated position in Baldwin’s works.

Baldwin also lands between these two absolute and opposite perspectives, and I aim to highlight the nature of his description of religion. The author witnesses the white actors who had the authority to define black people according to their imagination. At the same time, he also sees the white institutional Christian groups that held and continued to hold influential roles as the determiners of social structures. Combining these features, Baldwin finds that religious beliefs and the “God concept” are used to define people of color as inferior and, therefore, also justify racism. Michael Lackey uses the term “God concept” to describe an oppressive socio-political system, where colonial countries and superpowers use their faith to determine social roles (2007, 4). Similarly, I will use the term God concept in reference to the politicized theology used by organized white Christians to oppress other groups. An example of this political justification is the appliance of the curse of Ham. The curse dehumanized people of color by referring to the story from Genesis 9:20-27, where a curse turns Ham’s

children and future descendants, starting with Canaan, into slaves. Baldwin refers directly to the curse in his works and addresses its use on both a personal and general level.

In addition to Du Bois' sociology of black religion, I make use of African American religious thought and studies. Thus, exploring the modern complexities of black religious practices. Cornel West and Eddie Glaude Jr.'s approach to African American religious studies addresses the various ways African American life is influenced by the "moral languages of black religious expression and their complex relation to the ethical and political aspects of culture" (2003, xii). In addition to analyzing the role of black religion and its institutions in American society, their approach to African American studies delves into new research areas by analyzing discursive and ritualistic practices (West and Glaude Jr 2003, xiii). This new approach means that the study on black religion should explore a broader set of societal factors, including the relationship between black religious discourse and American ideology. Following this approach, I emphasize the social role of institutional religion and the relationship religion has to cultural expression and political attitudes in the modern American setting.

A significant aspect of African American religion in the twentieth century is the emergence of a black theology of liberation. The theological perspective was formatted by groups of black Christian academics and theologians who followed a method of reclaiming Christianity. The emergence of beliefs has even been discussed as a middle way between the Black Power movement and the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. Reiland Rabaka defines liberation theology as "*theology deeply rooted in lived experience, lived endurance and, perhaps most importantly, anti-imperial social and political praxis*, and imperialism – any form of imperialism, [like racism] is adamantly opposed" [italics in original] (2010, 206). The idea emerged in Latin America in the late 1960s as a response to the church's injustice and oppression (Corrigan 1998, 280). The black theology movement applied this liberation

theology to the American history of racism. Instead of considering the social context by exploring theology, black theologians approach it from the perspective of the social context, which details the black experience and history of oppression (Antonio 2007, 84). Similarly to DuBois, James Cone, who is central to developing this theory, criticizes the white church on the basis of its historical hypocrisy. However, as a theologian, Cone includes a broader theory regarding liberation, tradition, and blackness as a religious political reaction (2018). Jesus supposedly exists alongside those who experience oppression, and to act in his words is to rebel against the oppressor (Cone 1999, 11). Accordingly, the theology seeks to understand the Christian faith from the perspective of the oppressed (Cone 2010, 2).

I suggest that *Amen*, *Mountain*, and *Fire* employ different sources of Cone's theology in their presentation of religiosity. Cone's *A Black Theory of Liberation* highlights sources of black theology, and Baldwin arguably include similar elements such as – an understanding of the black experience, celebration of black culture, adoption of scriptures, and emphasis on traditions of western Christianity since the fourth century (2010, 24-32). However, these theological devices demand an institutional religious solution, and Baldwin's outlook arguably exists outside the roam of the church. Also, Baldwin does not focus on God's role in these theological devices. An understanding of black theology of liberation gives a valuable perspective to how Baldwin uses religion, and particularly, modern interpretations of Christianity. Furthermore, his inclusion of social context and cultural elements resembling black theology suggests people's motivation to join the church based on its social role and artistic features. Besides this social and cultural function, Baldwin's characters are further motivated by the idea that God has the power to save people.

In order to analyze Baldwin's portrayal of black Christians' commitment to God and the church in an American setting, I draw on of philosopher Louis Althusser's Marxist definition of ideology and its influence on individuals. Althusser invites a re-evaluation of the

term ideology, and refers to a structural set of beliefs that subjects unconsciously internalize and act in accordance with (2014, 194-96). People adopt these ideologies without evaluating their implications because of how they are introduced. By way of what appears as a direct address, which Althusser terms “interpellation”, an individual is “hailed” into a group, which makes him or her feel special – and a part of a wished-for community (2017, 775). Although Althusser’s term is primarily used in relation to capitalist society, I adopt interpellation in a broader sense to include the ideological system of religion that also hails individuals, leading them to become subjects to its underlying ideology. For example, discussing the idea that God would save African Americans, Ernest Bradford suggests that “religion practiced in this manner was, at its best, a method of escape and, at its worse, an opiate” (1983, 22). His example implies that Christianity created a feeling of a new home and having worth in the eyes of God, but the same belief could also lead to passivity. The notion of Christianity’s possible role as an “opiate” coincides with Althusser’s idea of “interpellation” because it creates a feeling of contentment when unconsciously subjected to an ideology.

Essential to the function of interpellation are “Repressive State Apparatuses” and “Ideological State Apparatuses” (Althusser 2014, 176-78). These institutions draw people into their ideological systems. The former enforce power, and in Baldwin’s works, they exist as the state and its system of slavery, and the policy of segregation and inequality in its aftermath. Contrastingly, ideological state apparatuses bring about systems of belief and values, and are represented in the church institutions, and partly also the family structures. The members of black church communities would remain hopeful that God would eventually save them from the oppression they have experienced in society, and this feeling of being chosen, or having a more substantial connection to God than others, might motivate them to pursue a life in the church. Also, they could perchance be drawn in by the church’s preaching, social aspects, and music. Accordingly, they become subjects to the Christian ideology of the

black churches. This religious commitment might also entail following the Bible and refraining from sinful acts; thus influencing large parts of their lives.

Baldwin recognizes and sees through the religious ideological state apparatuses and arguably writes his three works from an outside point of view. This perspective presents an environment where pastors function as manipulators, hailing their congregations to commit themselves to the church and its teachings, and to God. Their ability to hail the congregation does not signify a conscious decision by the clergy to make people subject to the church as an ideological state apparatus; instead, they are themselves convinced of the importance of following the church.

In addition to their ideological influence and hailing, they pressurize their congregation to follow a rigid set of beliefs, thus creating estrangement among the believers. This pressure appears to enact fear tactics, comparable to that of the historical sermon *Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God* (Edwards 2011). Similar to Jonathan Edwards' 1741 Calvinist sermon claims of conversion as a solution to sin, Baldwin also describes the initial feeling of relief but eventually suggests the temporary nature of this sensation. Approaching the Pentecostal churches from this perspective, Baldwin highlights the clergies and congregations' tendency to lean on conversions and use the message from God to reassure themselves of personal significance and safety.

Central to my understanding of the importance of conversion is William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which details the importance of individual religious experience and the circumstances of conversion (2014). The converting subjects are not transitioning from one set of beliefs to another, but rather undergoing a salvation that intensifies their current faith. I aim to highlight how conversions take place and what motivates them. In Chapter One, I employ John Lofland and Norman Skonovd's six conversion motifs to explain the conversion we witness in *Mountain* and *Amen* (1981). The

suggested categorization of these motifs also shows the nature of the performance and likely future of the converting subject. The conversions become a vital moment in the characters' lives and appear as significant parts of the experience of religion in *Mountain*, *Amen*, and *Fire*.

When it comes to Baldwin's work, there is an overarching presence of religion and its effects on the lives of black people outside and in the church. Baldwin's first novel *Mountain* provides a seemingly autobiographical introduction to a Pentecostal church community in Harlem during the 1930s. The novel details a family's visit to a local Pentecostal store-front church and centers around a dramatic conversion of a young boy, a similar experience to Baldwin's own. *Amen* was written right after *Mountain*, and although the play includes a young male character, the plot is built around his mother, pastor Margaret Alexander. The effects of America's racism and inequality are manifested in the churches' setting and the characters' eagerness to seek religious communities and salvation. This motivation also results from the binary structure of the church, which divides its members and their actions into good or evil, thus, sacred or secular. Because of this intense ethical pressure, some characters find themselves excluded from the church either voluntarily or against their will.

Fire, which consists of two personal letters, explores racism, political dehumanization, and the effects of religious teachings. Baldwin offers a critical approach to the function of religion and racism, basing his views on personal experience and historical events. In doing so, he addresses two different aspects; the first is the relationship Christian believers have to others, and the second is the relationship Christians, Baldwin included, have with God. The author assesses these relationships by examining the role of love in them. In reality, interpersonal relationships between people and their relationship to God are defined by Christian institutions rather than the underlying love that such a relationship would seem to rely on.

While Baldwin rejects the God concept, his works embody the church's role as a channel for cultural expression, performance, and amusement. This religious presence raises questions about the significance and meaning of biblical allusions. Literary critic Harold Bloom puts a clear emphasis on the stylistic features in Baldwin's work and claims that although the author inhabits an evangelical sense of consciousness, he also argues that "as a moral essayist, [Baldwin] is post-Christian, and persuades us that his prophetic stance is not so much religious as aesthetic" (Bloom 1986, 3). In turn, I propose to read his language as a testament to his past religious influences, on which he bases his current philosophy. The idea of Baldwin as "post-Christian" also minimizes his continuing relationship to religion. In addition to this, I do not think his religious language is the only evidence of his religiosity or lack thereof, but rather a contributing factor. Specifically, in *Fire*, which Bloom appears to refer to, but also in *Mountain*, Baldwin's religious language does create a Christian aesthetic, but I find that his works continue to show how biblical references and language either encourage empowerment or suggest suffering.

Chapter One explores *Mountain* and *Amen* together and argues that the two works complement each other in their portrayal of Pentecostal church experiences. Hence, I draw on the function of their genre and how they complement each other in terms of plot. Also, I propose that the cultural expressions that the texts refer to celebrate different elements of black culture and religion. These elements can be found in music, the spirituals, Bible readings, and preaching, and, at times, overshadow critique of manipulation and selfishness. By implementing these elements into his fiction, Baldwin embraces the way in which religion has been used as a means of empowerment in black communities. This empowerment is apparent in *Mountain's* adaptation of the Bible and *Amen's* performance of the church service in the format of a theater. In addition to joy that these aesthetic and religious experiences offer, the churches play a role of a family. However, looking at the way the familial

connections prevent love shows that Baldwin starts to question whether the characters' religious commitment serves any purpose. Accordingly, my reading stresses Baldwin's persistent focus on continuation and complementation of the role of love in the two works. *Mountain* introduces the issue of whether the church and its members can love and if love even fits the religious community. This emphasis on love continues in *Amen* with the conclusion that arguably underlines love as an moral solution. Considering the instances without love shows that the churches impose a strict set of rules on their members, which causes them to suspect that they themselves are evil.

My second chapter examines *Fire* and its attacks on hate, inequality, and racism in religious communities. The first part of Chapter Two looks at the expression of "public" or "official" religion. I consider the public role of religion with a distinction between institutions and social structures. The evidence of public religion shows historically oppressive actors as well as the behavior in Baldwin's church. The second part takes up the view on "personal" religion, which exists in people's commitment to scriptures and the supernatural. Important to my discussion is Baldwin's idea of love as a solution, and I explore whether this implies Christianity. In doing so, I make use of biblical allusions about a self-less love and his attitude to God.

Analyzing the three literary genres highlights the manner in which Baldwin perceives, describes and expresses religion, and shows that although he wants to reject the institutional faith, he never eliminates religious expression from his style, politics, or outlook. I find it essential to do a literary analysis across areas of studies to portray the influence of religion in the specific historic and contemporary periods. This approach presents a vital aspect of Baldwin's life and career, and demonstrates an alternative way of reading *Mountain*, *Amen*, and *Fire*.

Chapter 1: Seeking and Rejecting the Black Church in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner*

Introduction

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner* take place in Harlem during the 1930s and are highly influenced by the country's racial politics and its effects on religious institutions and social structures. This chapter sheds light on how Baldwin describes his view on religion at the beginning of his career. Furthermore, I explore how *Mountain* and *Amen*, both set in black Pentecostal churches, approach the issue of religion and black culture in the face of racism. In the churches, we witness joy, community, and personal relief, while the same structure also has a damaging effect on its members. By describing the church's positive and negative features, Baldwin enacts the structure suggested by Du Bois in "The Problem with Amusement", where the church provides both support and suffering (Du Bois 2000b). *Mountain* and *Amen*, defend religiosity by using cultural factors like music and biblical references to convey and explain the characters' experience. On the other hand, society and the church, including the individual defenders of these institutions, provide no ethical nuance or room for personal mistakes. This rigid conception of morality also makes it challenging to sustain loving relationships and care for others. Consequently, the church's social limitations inspire the characters' religious conversion or secular inclinations.

Mountain and *Amen* never address the white church and its violent history. Instead, the Black Church, or rather the Pentecostal church and its practices function as a representation of Christianity. Together, Baldwin's two works present the author's hostility towards the organized aspects of religion, and its adverse effects on personal religion. He also gives the impression of presenting his hopes for religious commitment and behavior. Essential to these hopes are true and universal love, compassion, and acceptance of mistakes. Baldwin takes

issue with rigid and institutional expressions of religion, choosing instead to extract the fundamental modes of compassion he detects within Christianity.

Baldwin's use of religious elements appears first in the titles of the two works. *Mountain*'s title comes from the black spiritual "Go Tell It on the Mountain", which describes John the Baptist's prediction or "Annunciation" of the birth of Jesus in Luke 1:24-30. Although it refers to the spiritual, it further relates to Moses' liberation of the Israelites from the Pharaoh; thus, the "Mountain" is Mount Sinai from Exodus 5:1 and 19:11. The title's epigraph "*They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint*" [italics in original] (2013) comes from Isaiah 40:31 and further confirms the novel's biblical implications and structure (Standley 1988, 188-89). Additionally, each chapter's epigraph includes a hymn from the Bible, which serves as a commentary on the upcoming events. Shirley Allen highlights the implication of two different bible stories of Moses and Jesus, and concludes that "the cry "Go tell it on the mountain" [...] is a shout of faith in ultimate victory while the struggle and suffering are still going on" (1975, 176). The title predicts an upcoming conversion and becomes a symbol for the path to religious salvation, but also a pathway to personal freedom. In addition to predicting the individual journey the characters explore in a church setting, these titles illustrate the adaptations of Christian symbolism. Specifically, this symbolism demonstrates interpretations that aligns with the black experience in the U.S.

As a contrast to the mountain, the title of the play *The Amen Corner* predicts a more restricted "corner". The church itself is first a corner because it is the only place where one can be saved, and the only option when other relationships fail. Although intended as a place of safety and joy, it becomes a "dark locus of revenge and sin" (Lynch 2000, 53). Within this dark corner, the church itself, is the congregation's intense personal pressure on its members.

Their excluding internal politics put their members in an impossible position as they have to navigate their life according to the church's dictates. As a consequence, the religious institution corners people with their restrictions. The same image can also represent the action of withdrawing to a corner, like a prayer corner. Such a corner represents a place for peace without distractions. This suggests a paradox where the corner becomes both a peaceful and restrictive place. "Amen", on the other hand, means "let it happen"; together, "amen" and "corner" imply acceptance of a type of loneliness, whether it is peace or social exclusion.

The motivation for discussing *Mountain* and *Amen* in the same chapter comes from Baldwin's own introduction to the play, in which he declares his disagreement with the response to the novel, and consequently tries to "change" this reception with *Amen* (1998, xiv). His reaction came after his publisher asked him to remove parts of the "come-to-Jesus stuff" (1998, xiv). I find his insistence to both keep the subject matter in the novel and to explore it once again in *Amen* important as it testifies to the significant role religion holds in his early fiction. Also, critics and scholars have often ignored *Amen* in their discussions on religion in Baldwin's oeuvre, and including the play gives a different perspective than many previous studies. Both works bring together the family and the church as core structures that determine the characters' lives and faith. The churches function as a safe alternative to the outside world, even though they reveal themselves to bring manipulation and misery. By reading the two texts together, I also want to highlight how Baldwin uses the two different genres to present the religious experience differently. While the novel explains the dangers of the world outside the church and describes the characters' internal involvement with religion by using biblical references in both dialogue and narration, the play stages and "acts out" the religious experience and the urgency of the characters' struggle. Analyzing the expression of culture and religious experience with social and theological traces in the two works provides a comprehensive view of how Baldwin understood and described religion in his early fiction.

The differences in format and religious experience further impact how critics read the two texts. Although there are not a considerable number of scholars who have written extensively about the complexity or importance of religion in Baldwin's literature, those I include generally see *Mountain* and *Amen* as neither secular nor religiously inspired texts. However, Rolf Lundén disagrees with other the critics and rejects that *Mountain* presents religious criticism (1981, 113). Similarly, Louis H. Pratt dismisses the classification of *Amen* as a religious drama and suggests that it is a drama about interpersonal conflicts (1978, 84). While I agree with his argument the role of these conflicts, I do not rule out the possibility of seeing interpersonal drama as a direct result of faith and organized religion. I explore this on the basis that their familial relations are driven by their attachment to God and the church. Furthermore, the scholar argues that the religious interpretation of *Amen* stems from some critics' inability to avoid seeing "the black man's world [as] a sphere of religious and racial consciousness" (Pratt 1978, 83-84). In other words, Pratt argues that the issue of race and racism is not apparent in *Amen*, and because of this, critics wrongly assume that Baldwin's work is religious. By writing off race as an imperative factor, Pratt minimizes the cultural presence of the church and the background for their attachment to the religious institution.

Set in the black Pentecostal churches, Du Bois' notion that one cannot examine religion without considering race is essential to understanding Baldwin's description of the religious experience in the two works. Similar to my introduction, where I described the role of race and racism, Stanley Macebuh claims that *Mountain* emphasizes the effects of social oppression and attacks black worship (1973, 52-53). However, he also emphasizes that the novel implies Baldwin's desire to reject his stepfather's God, get away from the restrictions of theological terror, and show that the fear of God and the despair of love consume everything (Macebuh 1973, 53). Still, I find that the theological terror, which Macebuh frequently refers to, does not fully explain the experience of the novel's characters inside the church. Instead, it

seems to be more of an ambiguous experience than exclusively terror. Moreover, my reading of the text draws on Du Bois' studies on the Black Church's role as a source of suffering and support.

Du Bois explores the complexity of the church as a community of joy and song, but whose members disapprove of its internal politics and passivity (2000b, 2008). This dual capacity of Du Bois, does not mean that the church is either a place of suffering or support, but its frameworks create a confusing place in between. I find a similar dual relationship in Baldwin's description of religion in *Mountain* and *Amen*. Michael Lynch criticizes other scholars for viewing Baldwin's work in binary terms and rejecting the duality of his relationship with churches, and challenges their oversimplification of Baldwin's view on religiosity as a merely religious critique (2000, 1997, 1996). His approach to viewing the ambiguity of Baldwin's religion is useful because it sheds light on the entire religious experience and not just on the attachment to a church. Similarly, I find *Mountain* and *Amen* to show Baldwin's attraction to some aspects of religion like music and personal empowerment, while also signaling a rejection of certain structural issues like the unloving nature and the emphasis on sin and guilt. Scholar Barbara K. Olson also dismisses the notion that *Amen* indicates a rejection of Christianity itself (1997, 300). Instead, she claims that the two works show that Baldwin "has portrayed Christianity as self-corrective. It is flawed in practice but not in essence" (Olson 1997, 300). Sharing this idea that Christianity is self-corrective, or possibly able to change, I aim to explore what I interpret as Baldwin's ideals for individual and collective religious practice.

Accordingly, the cultural presence of religion, specifically its references to historical and contemporary African American religious traditions, provides a partly favorable image of the church. Illustrating this portrayal, I compare the cultural expression in the two works with features from black theology. Baldwin's comparisons to biblical counterparts in *Mountain*

align with Cone's theory that there is a connection between the Bible and black Christians, while *Amen* introduces examples of the black community's cultural and religious self-expression (2010, 27-30). In addition, the two works present the social aspect of the church and its relation to religious practices. Central to these practices are love and compassion along with hate. Although connecting the characters' inability to love to the religious institutions' practice, I also see their unloving tradition as an indicator of the country's racism towards African Americans. This suggests a causality where the church's hatred represents the country's racism and therefore, also the individual's hate. The universal love one might expect to find in the church is missing because the church alienates the members who act against its expected rules.

While discussing love and hate, and ethical absolutes, I focus on the role of society and the church, including their representatives. This role also includes the church as an ideological state apparatus, which I unpack when referring to its empowering services and people's personal acceptance of religion as a safe place. The cultural significance and the joy that the characters experience in the church, together with social criticism, provide a look at the ambiguous impression of the religious institution and the background for Baldwin's complicated relationship with religion. His religiosity has often been determined based on his entire career; instead, I argue that its nature changes throughout. *Mountain* and *Amen*, specifically, present the beginning of his career and the way a novel and a play convey religion.

Re-imagining Christianity

Christianity plays a significant role in *Mountain*, and the author frequently uses the Bible and the church setting to illustrate the characters' experience. The novel details John Grimes and his family attending a Sunday service where he experiences a dramatic conversion on the

church floor, or “threshing floor” as Baldwin calls it (2013, 225). The Sunday service brings about the family members’ memories: those of his aunt Florence, his stepfather Gabriel, and his mother, Elizabeth. The church awakens these memories, or “prayers”, which introduce the family history and explain their current dynamics. Nevertheless, they also show that the family was exposed to hateful actions represented by racism and Gabriel’s selfish behavior. *Mountain*’s structure allows the reader to gradually understand John’s eagerness to be loved and accepted in the church, and the memories underline the importance of religion in the Grimes family. Religious scriptures function as the characters’ personal connection to the supernatural, and together with the historic adaption of the Bible, it presents the ways biblical characters like John of Patmos and Moses can be empowering. Spirituals and biblical allusions continue to further generate this feeling of personal significance and empowerment in the characters’ lives. By the same token, the comparison to biblical characters, like Ham, also show how religion can negatively affect the family members’ self-image.

When Baldwin engages with religion in *Mountain*, he does two things; he draws parallels between Gabriel and John, and biblical characters, and uses African American spirituals and religious allusions. The specific engagement with biblical characters is important because it ties him to political and historical black Christianity and the contemporary black theology movement. In the period before and after the country’s emancipation, black Christians would re-imagine and adapt the Christian faith to express their own experience of oppression (Antonio 2007, 79). The same way of re-imagining the Bible was formulated by Cone in the 1970s (2010, 2). The religious and political movement also questioned the whiteness of traditional Christian religion and the connection to the chosen people. Supporters of black theology have also directly challenged the Western European presentation of Jesus and suggested a connection with the oppressed black population in North America (Kunnie 2012; Hopkins 2012, 12). Similar to the black theologian, Baldwin

relies on the Book of Exodus to highlight the parallels between Egypt and the United States (Cone 2010, 30). However, I do not claim that Baldwin follows a specific theological method. Instead, I find that the historical transformation of the Christian faith to fit contemporary struggles also appears in *Mountain*. Baldwin uses these comparisons to make the characters' struggle universal and relatable. The biblical comparisons also suggest Baldwin's approval of a reformulated Christian teaching. I draw this comparison between Baldwin and black theology because it signifies how he negotiates and celebrates aspects of modern black religion.

At the center of these biblical comparisons are John and Gabriel Grimes, whose relationship is essential to Baldwin's use of the biblical father-and-son theme. Their relationship is easy to compare to Baldwin's own relationship to his stepfather, which he mentions in *Fire*. Gabriel meets Elizabeth after John's birth and promises to raise him as his own child. John and Gabriel's relationship suggests an analogy to the Bible's Noah and Ham. Baldwin uses these parallels to shed light on the relationship between the father and son and, arguably, the life of every black child. John compares himself to Ham, who "had been cursed, down to the present groaning generation" (2013, 232). He knows that similar to Noah's disregard of Ham, Gabriel hates John, a fact he struggles to understand. John feels that this curse applies specifically to him because he is black. While the curse of Ham was used by white Christians to justify slavery, John finds that his personal condition is a "fate of all his race, decreed by a Biblical forefather with the apparent blessing of God" (Foster 1971, 53). Like Gabriel's failure to love his son, the white world outside the church does the same. Although Gabriel and God could have helped him deal with this position in the world, he finds himself abandoned. The imagined curse leads to John's self-hate, a feeling many critics argue is a condition provoked by the white society that makes black men "feel degraded by their own blackness" (Foster 1971, 53). John realizes that he has sinned and that he was

always going to sin. Even though Ham's curse has been addressed on a more general level, John's self-evaluation shows an inner struggle and prepares him for conversion. John's comparison to Ham visualizes Baldwin's close commitment to the Bible and makes the character's struggle a broader issue. The references also indicate how various other destructive interpretations of the Bible can create self-hate.

Additionally, John is also identified as John of Patmos. The comparison to John of Patmos, and title's Moses by Mount Sinai, reformulates the white Christian understanding of the Bible and functions as an acceptance of a specific narrative of Christianity. John of Patmos and Moses stood up to their oppressor, and Baldwin transports these efforts to the 1930s United States. In addition to the title, Baldwin refers specifically to the empowerment of Moses and the Exodus myth when Florence speaks of her mother's wish to pass around the story of how God saved the Israelites (2013, 75). Florence's mother illustrates the story's function as a method of hope. The comparison to John of Patmos is apparent in the repetition of his name "John" after the personal pronouns "I" and "he", when he states "*I, John, saw a number, way in the middle of the air*" [italics in original] (Allen 1975, 180; 2013, 237). Others have also linked him to John the Baptist, who both anticipated and baptized Jesus in John 1:28. However, the similarities in style between John of Patmos and John Grimes shows a more likely connection.

Banned to the island of Patmos because of his faith, John got a message from Jesus urging him to resist the emperor's rules and demands (Revelation 1:20). This symbolic identification creates a parallel between the "hero's problem of being a victim of persecution out of his particular racial situation in the twentieth-century United States and places [the problem] in a larger historical and religious context" (Allen 1975, 180). Allen argues that the biblical allusion at the beginning of the novel brings a broader dimension to the family conflict, and the "religious apparatus, like the central scene of the tarry service itself, is used

not simply as psychological and social milieu for the action, but also to give symbolic expression and archetypal meaning to the characters and events” (1975, 178). Building on this argument, I find that Gabriel, as well as the church and even God, serves as John’s oppressor. By making these comparisons, Baldwin is following the black religious tradition of adapting the struggles of the biblical people to contemporary conflicts. Moreover, religion becomes a tool of expression and the counterparts demonstrate his re-imagination of Christian scriptures. By re-imagining this biblical story, Baldwin indicate a celebration of black religious imagination and formulates an empowering response to the whiteness of western Christianity.

The use of biblical allusions and spirituals makes the religious presence in the novel more apparent. Gabriel and his birth son’s relationships with secular temptations introduce the idea from 1 Kings 15:3 that sin follows from father to son. The idea is supported as his two birth sons follow his old habits of drinking and running around. However, his stepson experiences what Gabriel always wanted, a genuine connection with God. Allen also emphasizes that John’s “birthday falls on a Saturday, the Biblical Sabbath, a day set apart for making one’s account with God” (1975, 178). The symbolic day of his birthday anticipates the significance of his conversation with God. Inheritance of sins and the weekday of John’s conversion bring biblical allusion to the center of the plot. These allusions also imply that John holds a role as someone holy, or alternatively, the chosen one.

The use of traditional African American spirituals continues Baldwin’s emphasis on Christianity’s important role in historical and contemporary black communities in the US. During John’s conversion, he is again identified as John of Patmos (Allen 1975, 180). In doing so, he repeats the African American spiritual lyric “*I, John, saw the future, way up in the middle of the air*” [italics in original] (2013, 237). In addition, the novel’s title further references an African American spiritual. Historically, spirituals have been used as a liberating response to the outside world, and have contributed to shaping Christianity for

African Americans (Ramey 2002, 361). Benjamin Mays claims that because spirituals emerged from slave experiences and subsequent circumstances similar to slavery, they illustrate people's perception of God at the time (2010, 19). Similarly, James Weldon Johnson suggests that spirituals were "literally forged of sorrow in the heat of religious fervor" (1956, 20). In his introduction to the collection of American spirituals, Johnson testifies to the important role they hold and underlines that there is no way of

recreating the atmosphere – the fervor of the congregation, the amens and halleluiahs, the undertone of singing which was often a soft accompaniment to parts of the sermon; no the personality of the preacher – his physical magnetism, his gestures and gesticulations, his changes of tempo, his pauses for effect, and more than this, his tones of voice. (1927, 10)

If we consider the magnitude of the role of spirituals in not just religious culture, but culture in general, *Mountain* presents an apparent celebration of older black Christian practices. These examples show that religious language makes John's personal experience a universal experience, but it also underlines the important cultural significance of music in religious services. The role of music and spirituals continues in *Amen*, where the experience of the service plays a significant role in the meeting between individual and collective religious practices.

Religion as a Theater

Amen's performance of Margaret's sermon and the choir's music introduces the audience to the Pentecostal church service. Pastor Margaret runs the church and treats it as her family. She also serves as a spiritual leader to her congregation, but the church's senior members gradually discredit her position. The church is placed by her home and has a dominating presence on the stage. When the play starts, it bring together music, sermons, and communal support in its demonstrations of religious services. The rows and the darkness include the audience in the congregation and create a more intimate presentation of the choir than the

novel could. Olson also claims that the format and inclusion of these elements give “a taste of the overwhelming experience of the [P]entecostal worship” (1997, 298), which readers only read about in *Mountain*. Furthermore, Carolyn W. Sylvander argues that, in *Amen*,

the church, even as protection from the streets, is not given any positive characteristics here; its depiction is much less balanced than it was in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The scales of judgment are heavily loaded in favor of worldly love and family rather than congregational communion. (1980, 96)

Although I agree with Sylvander’s depiction of the social role of the church, I find that the church and its services are presented partly positively through the set-up of the stage and the service. By focusing on these positive features, I suggest Baldwin’s admiration of the cultural aspect of the Black Church. The cultural and religious experience is integral to Margaret’s service at the beginning of the play. The music and the stage directions offer another aspect of black theology, which emphasizes black culture and expression. Cone describes this as an “emancipation of black minds and black souls from white definitions of black humanity” (2010, 31). Accordingly, the service becomes a testament to the empowering cultural identity of the Black Church.

In the play’s introduction, Baldwin compares the communion to the theater and declares that he wanted to recreate the memories from his childhood to give the audience the experience “even against their will, to shake them up, and, hopefully, to change them” (1998, xvi). The stage directions describe a pulpit on a platform, the piano, a bible, and the chairs for the congregation (1998, 5). Even when the characters are in their house, the church gives “the impression of dominating the family’s living quarters” (1998, 5). The setting makes the religious institution consume every aspect of their life, and its presence looms large throughout the play. The church is also set above Margaret’s house, signaling its greater priority. The dominating role of the church on the stage makes the service appear as the most crucial aspect of the play. While representing Margaret’s personal priorities, its set-up also invites the audience to the church to experience its service at close hand. Sylvander also

argues that the motivation for the stage setting is to make the experience “come alive”(1980, 96) and suggests that the “rhythm of the Bible readings, the sermons, and the antiphonal phrases [...] are bound to arouse audience reaction” (1980, 96). Making the services engaging encourages an initial celebratory portrayal of the church, which seems to mirror the characters’ experience.

An example of the positive image the church creates is apparent in the first service when Margaret is called by the Holy Spirit to preach. Joy and engagement fill the church, and “the congregation sings – loud, violent, clapping of hands”(1998, 10). After their song, the religious experience consumes Margaret, and she claims that the Holy Spirit inhabits her (1998, 10). James Harris argues that the Holy Spirit and preaching are integral to the Black Church’s services and the preacher’s ability to deliver sermons (1995, 34). Its significance comes from Luke’s gospel 4:18-19 about Jesus, who was anointed by the spirit during his first sermon (Harris 1995, 34). Cone, in turn, finds that a preacher in a Black Church is not authentic without the anointment of the Holy Spirit (1986, 23). For Harris, too, writes that the “Holy Spirit makes the sermon come alive; it gives the sermon form and substance and causes the words that may be written or unwritten to connect with the lives of the brothers and sisters in the pews” (1995, 35). By inhabiting the spirit during her sermons, Margaret embodies the cultural and religious experience associated with “authentic preaching”. The preaching elevates the entire service and illustrates an integral part of collective religion. It also testifies to Margaret’s almost sacred role and feeling of being chosen by God. By creating a connection between the congregation and the audiences, the play presents the positive impact organized religion has on its members.

Furthermore, Baldwin makes use of music to show the atmosphere of churches in Harlem in the 1930s, and this arguably presents another part of the religious experience he enjoyed. The play starts with the congregations’ singing, and the first act ends with the

characters sitting on the floor and singing the gospel song “If Jesus had to pray, what about me?” (1998, 32). While there is a discussion regarding secular and sacred music, the church’s musical experience is always present and continues after Margaret steps down from the pulpit, and the congregation sings the gospel “Trouble of the World” (1998, 84). The performance of the specific music functions as another cultural signifier of their institution, and its format presents the tradition of the 1930s Pentecostal church.

The church music, although it creates joy, also represents the church restrictions, which I address in the last subchapter. Outside the religious institution, Margaret’s former husband Luke plays jazz in various clubs, and his presence draws their son David in the same direction. Jazz presents the 1930s secular movement, and its style is viewed as sinful and becomes a juxtaposition to the choir’s music. However, where the choir music previously presented the joyous culture of the service, jazz music shows the church’s restrictions. When Margaret leaves these restrictions and improvises during her last sermon, Saadi A. Simawe compares her delivery to a jazz performance (2000, 24). Because jazz is improvisation, it is comparable to freedom. People have previously claimed that religion and the church’s music were attempts to be free in spirit and seek liberation. Instead, the obedience imposed on the individual members restricts these ideas. Jazz allows them to step outside these limitations and move away from the traditional rhythm of gospel and spirituals.

I find that the inclusion of jazz, as an indication of freedom and a contrast to the church music, presents the limitations that come with the religious institution. However, ignoring the social pressure that the church exercises, one cannot deny the joy and cultural empowerment its choir brings to the audience. Where Olson sees the positive experience as almost an accident, Lynch sees it as a deliberate attempt by Baldwin to show the two-fold experience in the church (1997, 301; 2000, 67-68). By including such a critical element in its cultural identity, Baldwin presents its amusement to the reader and audience, thus joining the

contemporary movement, which viewed music as empowerment. That is not to say that the congregation abides by the message of the songs; musical references suggest that the author sees the church members' actions as hypocritical. The message of many of the choir songs is to spread love, which contrasts with the clergy's teachings. Although this is true, the music functions similarly to the sermons that make the service "come alive" and create an authentic service that presents the churches' cultural identity in Harlem in the 1930s. His presentation of the intimate connection in the store-front church and the joy produced by the services presents as an example of how individuals are hailed and recruited to ideologies by holy experiences. This experience and religious influence appear to reflect Baldwin's own memory and, ultimately, his reflection on the institution's cultural benefits. However, these benefits are eventually not enough as the organized church has an arguably destructive effect on its members.

Love and Hate

Although Christianity bases its practice on love and compassion, the religious behavior detailed in the two works presents a different image. The notion of love, or lack thereof, dominates the social criticism and the descriptions of collective religion. Macebuh even suggests that the end of *Mountain* displays Baldwin's discovery of "the religion of love" (1973, 67). The reason love and its absence become such an important factor is because of the institution's social function besides being a place of worship. Like many other American religious intuitions at the time, the Black Church holds a high degree of power and influence in the protagonist's geographical community. In contrast to a universal love that includes compassion, the church, which Gabriel represents, depicts animosity and a failure to care. This hatred also occurs in society and specifically by the white world. I find the country's racism and the family's consequential poverty essential to John's self-image and role in the

church. *Mountain*'s emphasis on people's inability to love is apparent in the presentation of the family and church as unloving institutions. As a contrast, the novel introduces a personal love but exemplifies how it is hard to achieve or maintain it in the church context. By distinguishing between the ideas of love explored in the introduction, Baldwin's priority seems to be a universal love that we never see acted out, and a personal love between the parent and child and in romantic relationships.

Emphasizing his focus on the issue of love, Baldwin details the social and personal effects of the country's racism and hate towards the Grimes family's community. John grows up in the North, unlike Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth who grew up in the South, yet their southern experience dominates his life. For example, Florence remembers fearing for her life after a group of white men raped and killed her neighbors (2013, 74). Her choice to move to the North alone illustrates the fear and dislike of her situation in the South. Yet, the secular life Florence chooses upon her move fails to bring her the life she desires. Similarly, black men experienced danger in the South. Gabriel, a preacher and the family's patriarch, remembers his first wife and his estranged mistress who died after giving birth to their now dead son. After the murder of a black veteran, Gabriel walks through the town, and trying to avoid "smil[ing] into any of these so well-known white faces"(2013, 165). He knows the history of the people behind their masks and what they are capable of doing and, for the first time, tries to protect his first-born son, whom he abandoned before he was born. In his only conversation with his estranged son, Gabriel warns him that he should be careful considering there is "nothing but white folks in town today. They done killed...last night..." (2013, 166). The terror of being "two black men alone in the dark and silent town where white men prowled like lions" (2013, 166-167) consumes their only conversation. Elizabeth's memory too, proves that racism has followed the family to the north, and remembers that John's biological father, Richard, was falsely arrested and accused of a robbery, which leads him to

commit suicide (2013, 205). The presence of racism continues in the second generation as John's brother is stabbed before the Sunday service by people who, Gabriel claims, are white (2013, 46). The racism and hate become a vital influence on their wish to find a religious safe place, as the white people they encounter represent the country's dangers. Moreover, they also serve as a juxtaposition to the universal love the church is supposed to offer.

Similar to the hate they experience from the outside world, Gabriel, obsessed with serving the purpose of God, fails to love his family. His behavior becomes the norm, and his violence is even described as love (2013, 19). The way Gabriel acts makes him the villain of the novel, and because of his standing in the church and stepfather function to John, God becomes the villain too. Similarly, Macebuh argues that Gabriel's inability to love represents God's failure to do the same, stating that his "insane and self-consuming hatred [exists] because he is incapable of love, and by the same token, the root cause of racism is the failure of love in society" (1973, 58-59). Consequently, John does not experience anything other than hatred, which ultimately leads to the self-hate expressed in his comparison to Ham and later conversion. However, Lundén's open critique of Macebluh's interpretation of the role Gabriel inhabits as God, claims that Gabriel has abandoned God, and all his actions are against the will of the Lord (1981, 117). Although I see instances of what Lundén interprets as Baldwin's ironic description of Gabriel, I consider the role Gabriel plays in John's life of a greater interest. Gabriel claims to follow God's command, and he leads his institutions both in the South and the North. The role he has in John's life as an incarnation of God demonstrates their dominant and passive roles. Passive in the sense that Gabriel has the option to help and support John, but fails to do so. Thus, John walks around desperate to be saved by God or Gabriel. In addition, Gabriel's actions function as a representation of the congregation's interpretation of religion, which might include a disregard for or misinterpretation of the words of God. Whether Gabriel acts according to God's will does not really matter because

God does nothing to help John until his conversion. Neither the church nor God displays a caring attitude, and their behavior has a destructive effect on their followers. The effects of these mindsets present love and loathing as a motivation for religious commitment and, accordingly, the issue with the church.

In contrast to Gabriel's life, Elizabeth and John's birth father Richard's relationship outside the church is based on pure love. The concept that was associated with religion turns out to imply a worldly personal love. While the characters experience violence and hatred, their own ability to care for and love each other dominates their lives. The society and the religious institutions' inability to exercise love and accept John and his birth parents become a crucial factor for the family's Sunday. Scholars have suggested that Baldwin's idea of an earthly or humanistic love does not resemble that of the church. However, I consider that the theme of love in *Mountain* is important to underline because it presents how the church teaches and practices love. It also demonstrates the way religion interferes with love. The church and characters in *Amen* continue a similar pattern but are ultimately forced to reexamine.

Rejecting Religion without Love

The role of love and hate in *Amen* is essential to understanding how Baldwin portrays religious practice. This idea is never explained or expressed directly; instead, Margaret acts it out at the end of the play. Her transformation underlines the problematic past and the inclusion of love on her new path. Consequently, love becomes a central theme in the presentation of collective religion and social dynamics in the church, and familial and romantic relationships. Similar to Gabriel, Margaret represents the church to her family and the congregation. Its literal disruptive role establishes it as the most important factor in her life. As a preacher, Margaret also dominates the church from the pulpit (1998, 5). Placed on a

“thronelike chair” (1998, 5), she resembles a royal figure. Her position contrasts with her life outside, where she experiences oppression and poverty. Margaret tries to bring together the congregation to follow God and act like a family. The institution of the church hailed Margaret in her younger years as well, and she joined it in hope that it would save her family life. Indoctrinated by its principles and rules, which she has felt a need to follow and has internalized, Margaret invites her congregation to follow the teachings of the Bible. At the same time, she realizes that she has failed at home. Having the two institutions side by side on the stage, we witness the same mistake made twice. The bond between the members of the family and the church breaks when love is missing. This missing love takes away her humanity and it is not until she realizes her mistakes that she considers love as a goal.

Amen proves the importance of love in religion by demonstrating Margaret’s ability to love. The same Sunday, as Margaret holds her service, her dying former husband Luke returns to visit her and their son David, who plays piano in the church. After his return, her son and clergy judge her for leaving her husband. Rejecting Luke’s secular behavior, Margaret continues to ignore his condition in favor of the church, proving her failure to love. When Luke and David leave the institution, Margaret is ultimately left alone. Meanwhile, the senior members of the church become suspicious of Margaret’s ethics and force her out. This loneliness depicts the effects of religion without love. I find that her realization particularly profound because of her efforts to make the church a family. However, such a union cannot work when she prioritizes a commitment to church over compassion. Her behavior suggests Baldwin’s emphasis on a Christian practice centered on universal love.

Playing out over the course of a week, *Amen* emphasizes the congregation’s sudden ability to corner Margaret and the rapidity of her change. In her last moments with Luke, she realizes that “it’s not possible to stop loving anybody you ever really loved. I never stopped loving you, Luke. I tried. But I never stopped loving you” (1998, 86). However, when she

walks into the pulpit the last time, Margaret proclaims “you can’t love God unless you’s willing to give up everything for Him. Everything.” (1998, 87). This dramatic moment when she realizes that her son has left the church encourages her to face the congregation and prioritize differently. The moment becomes a manifestation of her change and its implication of universal love. It seems as if Margaret finally realizes that she neither could nor would give up everything for God, including her relationship with her son; instead, she claims that to “love the Lord is to love all His children – all of them, everyone! – and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!” (1998, 88). This quote, which I see as a testament to a universal love, signals agape, which means that she loves because God loves her—thus creating a religious presence in her idea of love. She also seems to follow Apostle Paul’s wish for Christians to follow the commandments and love everyone as Jesus did.

Simultaneously, she declines that “the singing and the shouting [,] the reading of the Bible [or] running all over everybody trying to get to heaven” (1998, 88) testify to a person’s love and faith. Her realization reclaims Christian values, which the church seemed to have forgotten, and the dramatic monologue positions the lack of love as the institution’s core issue. Although Margaret never applies the type of hate that we witness in *Mountain*, the play emphasizes the church’s ability to separate families. It also positions people’s relationship with the church and God as more substantial than the one they hold to their peers. Ultimately, there seems to be no purpose of religion without love. Margaret’s experience indicates a limited possibility of acting with love when committed to the church.

Previously, Margaret would substitute “piety for love” (Field 2008, 446), and let her passivity ruin her personal relationships. Still, Olson claims that due to “Margaret’s biblical language and churchly context” (1997, 300), her love remains within the Christian tradition. By focusing on Margaret’s churchly context, Olson ignores the nature of the church in *Amen*. The religious institution initially introduces Margaret to love, but the it fails to act

accordingly. Instead, I propose to read Margaret's change as the result of her experience, and that makes her embark on her own individual and spiritual path. This transformation gives her the ability to apply a universal love, which, consequently, also leads her to humanity. In addition, she re-discovers a personal love for her husband and her son. Margaret acts according to both Gabriel's failure to love and Elizabeth and John's ability to love. This thematic and ideological extension from *Mountain* to *Amen* affirms Baldwin's ability to accept Christianity on specific terms. Essential to these terms is humanity, which promotes love within families and towards peers. Her internal transformation detaches her from the church, and the congregation's behavior mirrors Margaret's old conduct. The ethical framework of the church, which separates people and actions into secular or sacred, is crucial to understanding why Margaret's love cannot be accepted.

Conversion as a Solution for “Sinners”

The so-called southern and northern churches in the *Mountain* are cultural and social institutions that provide spiritual guidance. At the same time, they determine what should be considered morally right or wrong, thus “sacred” and “secular”. These categorical opposites separate the sinners from true believers, who follow the teachings of the church. However, the Grimes family's relationship to the church is detrimental because the white world rejects them. This means that they seek religious commitment even though it brings such a rigid set of beliefs. The background and result of John's conversion and his mother Elizabeth's transformation suggest that suffering, fear, and manipulation play a significant role in making people join the church. These factors come from their surroundings and family relations as well as the religious institutions' belief system. Yet, Baldwin also suggests that God and the congregation guide their internal desires.

Although we witness the personal reactions of those who are deemed “sinful”, the novel never thematizes the church’s requirements regarding its members’ code of behavior. Instead, already a subject to a particular religious behavior, Gabriel persuades individuals to follow his path, and serves as their moral compass. His moralist approach is apparent when he hears his sister crying in the church, and only hears the cry of a sinner who has been exposed (2013, 102). His failure to love John also comes from his ideas of Christianity that mark his stepson as evil. Despite his successful and influential role in the church, Florence questions Gabriel’s personal change throughout their life, and his mistress and son confirm her opinion (2013, 98). Florence rejects that his religious beliefs testify to his moral values and ability to take responsibility. However, the rest of the church accepts Gabriel as good, and Elizabeth claims that this is true because of how frequently he prays (2013, 19). The thoughts and memories of John and his family demonstrate the communal respect for Gabriel despite his long history of selfishness. I also read Florence’s opinion about Gabriel’s hypocrisy as Baldwin’s own view of the church as a moral compass. This view diminishes the notion that Gabriel’s religious commitment testifies to his worth or kindness. Besides his relationship with John, Gabriel also ruins the relationship with his first-born son as he prioritizes the expectations of the church. To appear as a devoted husband who preaches in the church serves as the most important factor. Accordingly, both black and white churches have defended their actions with constructed ideas of virtue and ethics.

Because the church never punishes Gabriel for his sins, he apparently lacks the awareness of his own wrongdoings. Still, the memories of his affair, neglect of his son, and his relationship with John become overwhelming at the end. Furthermore, Gabriel’s commitment to God and the church is “impotent, for it does not change him but merely disguises the self-loathing which rankles beneath” (Foster 1971, 54). His initial acceptance of John indicates a parallel to the biblical instruction about visiting the “fatherless and widows in

affliction”(James 1:27). This example embodies the failure of Gabriel. Instead of loving and caring for John and Elizabeth, he embraces them out of an imagined moral obligation that he cannot sustain. He arguably repeats the mistake he made with his mistress and first-born son, and treats Elizabeth and John similarly. Through these examples, the author presents Gabriel’s undeniable hypocrisy. When Gabriel fails to act as he is supposed to do, it suggests that the entire church is hypocritical.

Baldwin’s critique of the church’s tension seems to be regarding two factors. Firstly, he does not believe that anything exists with a clearly defined, dialectic distinction. Secondly, the action of disregarding everything that is not sacred is consequentially cruel or even secular. Through the description of this binary ethical framework, Baldwin has presented the church as a mean and unloving institution that leaves no room for mistakes. Because the members act in a Christian setting, the negative aspects of this institution also present God in an unfavorable light. Furthermore, Lynch argues that this presentation of God suggests that “these people have modeled their behavior on the image of God fostered by their past leaders as well as their present pastor” (2000, 52). The notion that morals can be easily distinguished leads to personal agony and to a society’s struggle with accepting alleged secular behavior. The author’s criticism becomes particularly apparent when the church punishes alleged sinners with social exclusion and a guilt-based doctrine, despite being devout members of the congregation.

The personal result of this doctrine is apparent in John’s internal struggle. Adopting his father’s theological absolutes John looks for sin around him and in his mind (Foster 1971, 51). Consequently, he wakes up on his birthday and imagines that his family will not celebrate the big day (2013, 11-12). He is remarkably aware of his father’s view of sinners, and he knows that Gabriel thinks his “face was the face of Satan” (2013, 23). John’s mindset illustrates his consumption with the dogma that distinguishes between good and evil, and the

evil scares him into a hateful mindset. He adopts the worldview of his father and, when he walks past the movie houses, he also registers “the marks of Satan” (2013, 31) on people’s faces, while imagining only a few would find the “life eternal” (2013, 32). Witnessing Satan on other faces signifies the congregation’s ability to unjustly identify others who perchance sins and judge them for their conduct. Thinking that he inhabits evil himself, John becomes desperate for love or salvation. The ultimate way to achieve this is to go through a conversion.

These ethical absolutes, which Macebuh argues function as “theological terror” (1975, 53), forces the characters towards the church. John’s internal thoughts illustrate that previously committed sins make religious acceptance crucial for survival. Although the characters inhabit internal self-hate, I argue that the congregation, God, and society are the most alarming challenges. These institutions arguably create this self-hate as they base their doctrine on religious morality and fear of sin. Even though none of the characters experience direct pressure from the church to transform, I find that the surrounding environment pressures them to follow church rules and seek acceptance from the congregation.

Elizabeth’s memories show a person’s turn to religion as a direct result of how the church hails its congregation with a promise of salvation. She re-commits to a religious life as a young mom faced with the dangers of the outside world and a feeling of guilt because of a previous relationship. Elizabeth believes that her relationship with Gabriel will help her religious commitment, which she let go of while she was together with Richard. When she moves north with her boyfriend Richard, he is “the center and the heart” (2013, 190), and even a message from God could not have changed her mind. Although upset that Richard’s friends oppose Christianity, she does not repent being with him without getting married (2013, 192), thus prioritizing love over religion. Her happiness serves as an example of love outside the church. When she meets Gabriel after Richard’s suicide, he tells her that God will reward her with blessings if she acts well. His promise of hope and happiness is pervasive,

“filling her mind: *All things work together for good to them that love the Lord*” [italics in original] (2013, 219), and for the first time since Richard’s death, Elizabeth feels hopeful. The reason for her sudden optimism is the treatment she endured as a single mom, where she decided to wear a wedding ring to signal an approved love that the institutions of marriage and family granted. Her new hope implies direct and indirect hailing that indicate that her life with Gabriel will work out. Elizabeth immediately believes that this is true, and accepts what she imagines to be her solution.

Baldwin also indicates Gabriel’s manipulative strategy as representative of God and the church. His proposition suggests that John’s struggle to the mountain starts with Elizabeth’s role as an unmarried mother. Unconsciously submitting to the ideology of the church, she hopes that “God might raise her again in honor [and that she has] begun her upward climb – upward, with her baby, on the steep, steep side of the mountain” (2013, 219). After meeting Gabriel, she prepares to “embrace again the faith she had abandoned, and walk again in the light from which, with Richard, she had so far fled” (2013, 220). When Gabriel proposes and cites God’s will as the motivation to marry Elizabeth and take care of John, she hopes this means that she and John will be saved (2013, 223). Elizabeth’s anguish also pervades in John’s mind and leads to his night on the church floor.

Her history with Richard, although happy in her memory, becomes a sin she needs to repent. However, because her love for Richard was true, she refuses to do so. Instead, she takes other necessary steps to be accepted by the church and by God. Moreover, the church’s treatment of her relationship with Richard, which is an example of personal and romantic love, proves that the church prioritizes Christian ethics over love. Being born out of wedlock, John is destined to fail unless someone, like Gabriel, decides to accept him. Because Elizabeth is motivated by this possible salvation when she accepts his proposal, their relationship seems practical. Her account presents the dreadful experience of not abiding by

the rules of the church, and the consequential desperation brought forth by ideas about sin. However, it also demonstrates the joy she experienced loving Richard. When Gabriel and the church accept her, she falls victim to the idea that her future is saved. Elizabeth's story also presents the ulterior motives that appear out of the fear of hell.

Religious conversion is a direct effect of the unloving pattern and the focus on morality. The conversion we witness in *Mountain* take place throughout the plot, and in the older family members' memories of their childhood, John's conversion constantly draws them back to the church floor. James' *Varieties of Religion* classifies religious conversion as a person's change from being "consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy, [to becoming] unified and consciously right, superior and happy" (2014, 186). Peter L. Berger et al. view conversions as dramatic change, which leads the subject to reinterpret their life (1967, 178-79). Their theory claims that conversion creates a new reality, where the subject views everything in regards to either before or after the conversion (Berger et al. 1967, 178-179; McGinty 2006, 33). Accordingly, I consider Elizabeth's experience as a religious transformations. This is also true for Florence who even attests her whole life that religious commitment does not change a person. Still, in fear of death, she tries to find solace in the church. John, who gains a feeling of contentment and confidence, which changes his outlook on life, "undergoes" a conversion. Essential to my discussion on conversion is the motivation and the nature of the performance. This individual religious experience becomes a part of Baldwin's critique of the collective religion. The presentation of John's conversion indicate the author's rejection of the church's social role and celebrates parts of the individual's religious experience.

The motivation for John's conversion demonstrates the degree of social and, consequentially, internal pressure. The classification of his motivation also predicts the temporary nature of his religious commitment. Lofland and Skonovd's study "Conversion

Motifs” describes the intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive motifs (1981). A motif refers to the motivation to undergo a conversion, the experience itself, and the likely future. The revivalist conversion is motivated by social pressure, which “can produce fear, guilt, and joy of such intensity that individuals may obediently go through the outward and inward methodology of a fundamentalist or evangelical conversion” (Lofland and Skonovd 1981, 381). This motif often leads to temporary religious commitment. Due to the rarity of true revivalist conversion, Lofland and Skonovd use the term “first level of reality” to describe the conversion, which includes “profound experiences which occur within the context of an emotionally aroused crowd”(Lofland and Skonovd 1981, 380).

Focusing on the social pressure and the nature of the conversion experience, I find that John appears to enact a revivalist conversion. The conversion differs from the eighteenth and nineteenth-century rituals that Lofland and Skonovd introduce, but still includes the dramatic performance in front of an engaged crowd. The dramatic effect is apparent in the description of the church’s support and admiration (2013, 244). His fear and guilt as a result of social pressure are still apparent when he lies on the church floor, thinking that he is alone and suspects that “they did not help him because they did not care – because they did not love him” (2013, 230). John needs God to save him because he imagines that his family and society have no affection for him. This desire means that he never approaches God or Christianity with “pure” intents, but instead as a last resort. This suggests that the church’s hailing John meets with a reassurance that he is and will be fine.

Because John’s revivalist conversion is motivated to a high degree by social pressure, it appears to be flawed or corrupted. Critics have disagreed about the significance of the conversion, thus whether its experience is a genuine or ironic depiction, and have largely leaned against the latter after the publication of *Fire* (Lundén 1981, 115). Baldwin describes John’s painful experience of lying on the church floor alone, and the fact that the power that

compels him to throw himself down on the floor saves him suggests an ironic description of the conversion. Still, I claim that his internal peace is important to highlight, because it further emphasizes Baldwin's dual portrayal of individual religion. Besides, the conversion is not simply a religious experience, but also a personal salvation. The somewhat positive effect of this experience seems to nearly transcend the institutional issues that cause it. The result of his conversion was problematized by David Foster who argues that John's faith resembles that of his father because it never changes him (1971, 54). John becomes a victim to Gabriel's actions and attitudes, and a change on his father's premises will not change him for the better. Lynch, in turn, proposes that the conversion leads to a new maturity and strength to address Gabriel (1993, 169). Although I do not think that the conversion changes John morally, I do not believe this is why his conversion occurs either.

In addition to this, the idea that John's behavior is immoral appears to exist solely in his head. The conversion gives him the support from God and this newfound courage makes him withdraw from Gabriel. John appears seemingly able to depart from his previous self-hate, and the narrator highlights this turning point with a simple declaration, "he was set free" (2013, 240). His battle, which the mountain represents, becomes more hopeful and optimistic. This is the moment where I find a more positive portrayal of his religious experience. Although extreme and scary, the conversion leads John to find help in God, the incarnation of a good father figure that offers safety as opposed to what he earlier experienced as a destructive force. The moment he is set free is the most evident example of how he becomes a subject to religious ideology (Parker 2015, 231-32). Still, John's conversion is not just a dogmatic kind of belief, but a mode of confidence and trust, which arguably distinguishes him from the congregation. Although he receives support from the church and feels the love of God, its institutional policy does not seem to change. Lynch even suggests that the strength John gains after the conversion happens despite the religious institution, not because of it

(1993, 163). If his change happens despite the church, his entire religious experience should exist outside of it. However, John's social situation does not allow him to leave, nor does he seem to want to (2013, 245). Even though his new reality might be another subjection to a dominant set of beliefs that the church supports, I see it as a vital moment because it indicates his release from his self-hate and his father's control.

The fear of what is considered secular or even sinful triggers Gabriel, Florence, and Elizabeth's religious transformations, but they never truly change. John, on the other hand, feels like a new person. By describing John's internal agony of being misunderstood, the author emphasizes the personal misery of organized religion. This agony is a direct result of the ethical framework that only allows love on specific terms. However, the conversion changes this structure and presents the joy of salvation. Baldwin is able to emphasize the protagonist's internal struggle and, after the conversion, he emphasizes his rise in confidence. Thus, the conversion shows that, even though the motivation and process are manipulative and scary, it can nevertheless result in a positive transformative experience. This experience is not simply a feeling of being relieved after escaping the claws of ideology; the result also demonstrates a new individuality that frees him from his father's grip. If the mountain is a pathway to freedom, John feels as if he were scaling towards its peak. Despite the joy and relief John feels in the moment, he still experiences an attachment to the church. A revivalist conversion is also often temporary, and because the novel ends after they return from the church, we do not know what happens with John's religious experience. *Amen* continues this theme of uncertainty by suggesting with the gesture of Margaret's son David.

“The Amen Corner” Outside the Church

Viewing life in the scope of sacred and secular continues in Margaret's church, where its ability to find fault alienates its most considerable contributions. Margaret has a similar role

as Gabriel; she imposes ethical absolutes on the church members and her family, and she fails to accept their alleged secular actions. This failure to accept nuance or “mistakes” shows that the church cannot change, and therefore loses its humanity. *Amen* continues the theme that suffering motivates change, and, through its emphasis on the church’s rules, it presents the desperation people experience.

Further underlining the binary framework imposed by religious beliefs, Margaret claims that she thought God would save her and David if she left Luke. Her rigid understanding of morality continues throughout her years as a pastor. Similar to how Gabriel thinks that Florence’s illness is a result of her sins, Margaret ties the sickness, yet also the death of babies, to people’s failure to believe in God. Ida Jackson, a young churchgoer, comes to Margaret because she has already lost a child and fears that the same will happen to her sick baby (1998, 13). Margaret claims that the “Lord is mighty to save” (1998, 13), and questions Ida about her husband’s religiosity. This statement suggests a certain passivity as she leans on God to determine her life. Previously, Luke and Margaret lost their daughter before she was born, and the loss leads to Margaret’s first conversion. Similarly to how Margaret warns Ida not to let “the Lord have to take another baby from you” (1998, 14), she leaves her husband because she fears that God will punish them for previously committed sins (1998, 59). Margaret sees death as God’s punishment for their secular behavior. After leaving Luke she believes that serving God will bring her the joy and safety that her husband was supposed to provide. Margaret’s role as a preacher creates a feeling of God’s mercy, and her initial position on a “thronelike chair” suggests that she appreciates her new role. Still, she warns Ida about staying with her husband, thus giving the impression of a continuing effort to tell herself that she made the right decision in choosing God over Luke. Margaret’s regrets become more apparent upon Luke’s return and the clergy’s increasing suspicions.

The distinction between the sacred and secular also affects smaller aspects of the congregation's lives. Margaret starts the service by preaching about expected morals and demands that the congregation act accordingly once they leave the church (1998, 9). The suggestions limit the few employment options they have, and create dissatisfaction among the clergy. Aware of Margaret's strict concept of morality, the clergy starts to question Margaret for ending her marriage. They also continue the pastor's old conduct and suggest that her drums and trumpets are "kind of worldly" (1998, 53). Implied in "worldly" is their idea of secularity attached to certain instruments. These ethical absolutes exert a personal reaction whereby one has to choose between commitment to or social exclusion from the church.

Margaret turns to the church as a result of a terrifying and dramatic conversion after she abandons her husband. The past conversion, although explained briefly, shares some of the same features with John's revivalist conversion. When Margaret leaves the religious institution and promises to love everybody, she arguably goes through her second conversion, which I categorize as "mystical". Lofland and Skonovd's mystical conversion motif can be preceded by stress but happens with minimal social pressure (1981, 377). The conversion happens fast and includes an emotional arousal of love, and is followed by an intensification of "the religion with which the conversion experience is associated" (Lofland and Skonovd 1981, 378). I find that Margaret enacts a mystical conversion, in which she changes the course of her religiosity. She leaves behind her religious community and shows an entirely new attitude towards life and the world.

Like Gabriel, Elizabeth, and Florence, Margaret's pivot to Christianity starts with fear; unlike the characters in *Mountain*, her faith changes and, ultimately, the wish to serve others defines it. Although the congregation pressures her to leave, the conversion is driven by an internal wish to change the way she worships God. After her conversion, she accepts her situation and retrieves herself to Luke's bedroom; in other words, the silent corner. When she

steps into this silent corner, she is a changed person, and her religious faith is strengthened in a new way, thus showing a positive experience without the church's commitment. Still, I find the church's inability to accept Margaret's new direction the most prominent issue from the section of the play. It demonstrates the controlling aspects of collective religion and presents a better path outside of it. In addition to detailing Margaret's transformation as a juxtaposition to Gabriel, *Amen* also suggests a possible outcome of John's religious experience.

David represents an older John, and comparing these two characters implies the future of John's revivalist conversion. Where John needed to be saved by God, David has grown, and by gaining individuality from the ideological belief system, he can save himself. Viewing David as a future John, I find that Baldwin emphasizes the temporary solace religion provides. Thus, David's connection to God disappears, and he becomes conscious of and impatient with the church's rules. David's story shows that religiosity provides a short-lived joy, albeit difficult to sustain. Talking to Luke about the loss of his faith, he admits to his disillusion: "I stopped believing – it just went way" (1998, 43). The dramatic conversion of John proves to be temporary and almost a distraction from his life.

With the interpellation that draws people to religious ideology Sondra O'Neale's argument about a possible encouragement of passivity endorsed by the church rings true; applying

an objective look at the constantly apposed treatment of his own experience and the collective black Christian experience, leads to the suspicion that Baldwin really does not believe in the possibility of a spiritual epiphany to lift the black man above the environment of his anguish. At least he seems to accept the prevailing social theories that treat Christianity as simply a force to keep black people insensitive to the need for more immediate freedom. Both aspects can be seen in John Grimes's conversion, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* under the jealous eye of his cruel, oppressive stepfather, an un-Christian minister; in the tawdry, fractious, loveless relationships in the midst of "devout" religious fervor in *Amen Corner* – wretched "saved saints" who will not stoop to save the dying father Luke Alexander. (1988, 131).

Accordingly, Baldwin's portrayal of the false and temporary hope from religious institution suggests that religiosity can prevent agency and individuality. Margaret acts this

out when she relies on God to lead her life and make decisions for her. As a consequence of this blind devotion to God, she never goes back to Luke or feels compassion upon his return.

Similar to John's quest for a father, David too believes that his father left him; instead, it becomes clear that Luke never left; however, his mother prioritized the church over him. Edward Margolies argues that the Black Church partly fills their psychic needs by inhabiting an Old Testament God who holds the masculine role they miss in their family and social lives (1986, 62). Although Gabriel represents God in John's life, he seeks an acceptance and a personal relationship to God when his stepfather's is does not love him. Similarly, O'Neale argues that the racist society does not let the father be an economically or socially functioning father (1988, 133). However, this is proven wrong in *Amen*, where Luke returns and is supportive of and loving to David. Luke's encouragement leads David to finally leave the church and explore his non-ecclesiastical music interests. Still, David's previous turn to atheism proves that he can reject God both without and with the presence of his father.

Baldwin's re-imagination of Christianity and portrayal of the two churches creates a shared experience where we witness how religion and black cultural expression attract members to feel joy, support, and empowerment. This attraction becomes overshadowed by structural issues with the churches and, ultimately, the characters' failure to love. However, these same factors become the reason why people commit to the church and subject themselves to the idea that Christianity protects them. The issue of a young man's attraction to the church as a safe alternative to an absent father and dangerous society continues in *Fire* where Baldwin details his own upbringing in the church.

Chapter Two: Religious Practices and an Unloving God in *The Fire*

Next Time

Introduction

Nearly a decade after Baldwin wrote *Mountain and Amen*, *Fire* revisits the Pentecostal church from his childhood by exploring the relationship between black and white Americans (2017). The black church is no longer his only point of attention when it comes to religion, and Baldwin becomes increasingly forthright and explicit in his denunciation of how religion has been exploited. Unlike his two previous works, *Fire*, which consists of two letters originally published in newspapers, approaches religion from Baldwin's own experience. His accounts show an apparent lack of personal religiosity and a rejection of institutionalized interpretations of Christianity. Although *Fire* never denounces the author's personal religiosity, this chapter continues with the analysis of his perspective on religion as an individual and collective practice. Hence, I explore how Baldwin continues to confront the ways in which racism, black culture, and religion intersect.

Where *Mountain and Amen* detail and perform the negative experiences of religion, Baldwin's personal reflections in *Fire* raise a critique of Christianity by presenting the author's experience of religion, faith, and political opinion. This includes an increased emphasis on the religion of white Americans. *Fire* also signals a transition from the more favorable perception of certain religious features, which I have argued Baldwin expresses in *Mountain and Amen* in Chapter One: the service as a ritual, biblical empowerment, and a relationship with God outside the church. Although *Fire* lays bare the author's complicated attitude to his personal religious beliefs, Baldwin also engages with religious tendencies like love, the Bible, and social equality.

My contention is that *Fire* and its treatment of religion cannot be fully grasped without the context of the racial inequality Baldwin endured in the United States of the 1960s. He stands out as an increasingly secular political voice during a period when liberation narratives, as well as political movements, based their politics on Christianity or Islam (Mattis and Jagers 2001, 531). Although Baldwin's thoughts on liberation in *Fire* are comparable to contemporary authors and activists like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, he uses early Christian philosophy and references to history rather than a theological message to convey his political opinion. Essential to this political opinion and idea of humanism is a universal love, which he demands that both the black and white churches endorse and preach. Universal love is similar to agape, which entails that people should love everyone unconditionally, without an alternative motivation.

The title, "The Fire Next Time", appears both at the beginning and the end of the texts as a warning. It directly references the story of Noah from chapters 6-7 in the Book of Genesis and the New Testament warning, that God will punish the world with fire instead of water and flood upon his next return (2 Peter 3:5-7). Following his appeal to black and white Americans to come together and love each other, Baldwin turns to this biblical reference and cites a line from an African American spiritual titled "Mary Don't You Weep": "*God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*" (2017, 89), suggesting, as it were, revenge and violence. Created by Christian slaves before the Civil War, the hymn became popular during the civil rights movement in the 1960s (Wren 2000, 194; Turck 2008, 52). In the repetition of the hymn lines, Baldwin transports the threat of fire, or a punishment day, to the 1960s, thus demanding a re-evaluation of the present Christian practice. Baldwin's intertextual gesture indicates that Americans, just like God's adversaries from the Old Testament, need to change before it is too late. In his view, this change mandates acceptance of the black population, who had already endured centuries of oppression.

Baldwin also brings in religious references for the two sub-titles, “My Dungeon Shook” and “Down at the Cross”. In the introductory chapter, he refers directly to a poet who wrote, “*The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off*” (2017, 18). The line derives from a spiritual concerned with the feeling of immediate freedom after the emancipation. “Down at the Cross”, in turn, is a line from another Christian hymn that relates to Jesus’ crucifixion. Overall, the titles serve as initial examples of Baldwin’s tendency to relate contemporary political struggles to the Bible and re-introduce traditional spirituals and poems. They also imply a continuation of the conditions black Americans faced after the abolition of slavery in 1865 to his current life in the 1960s.

Although I read the letters as a collective work, I want to first unpack the different issues each of the letter introduces. The first letter “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation”, brings in Baldwin’s nephew James as the recipient. Baldwin explains that the reason for writing to his nephew is “to try to tell [him] something about *them*, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist” [emphasis in original] (2017, 15). Even though the letter seemingly addresses his nephew, it also talks to “them”, which subverts the traditional reference used by whites to whom non-whites were secondary or less significant. Later, Baldwin refers to “them” as “[y]our countrymen” (2017, 15), or the “white world” (2017, 13). Overall, Baldwin’s deeply personal letter is an outright warning about the dangers of living as a person of color in the U.S. However, the reference to the actions of his countrymen, or fellow citizens, also introduces white Americans into the narrative. By doing so, Baldwin highlights the dangers he encounters because of how white people perceive him. Introducing this general threat to African Americans makes the letter apply to a much larger, possibly universal audience, including children, who have the same experience as his nephew. Although detailing these social issues, “My Dungeon Shook” proclaims an unreciprocated universal love for all his

fellow citizens. Thus, the letter becomes an introduction to both personal and universal love. It also establishes the urgency and personal motivation behind his wish for political and religious liberation.

In the second essay, “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind”, Baldwin describes both injustices of the past and present, as well as his hopes for the future. The essay consists of three parts – Baldwin’s experience and rejection of the church, his meeting with the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad and, finally, his confrontational and political conclusion about the civil rights issues in the U.S. This chapter focuses mostly on the first part concerning his meeting with Christianity. After observing the crime unfolding in his neighborhood, “the Avenue”, he is persuaded to join the church. For Baldwin, the Avenue becomes a manifestation of sin and its destructive impact. When he falls to the church floor during a conversion, he realizes that the God he prays to is white. Still, Baldwin fears the Avenue more, and after the realization, he feels saved from his worries and fears. Describing his experience as a preacher, he repeats one of the most important elements in my reading of *Mountain and Amen*, which is the unprecedented experience of joy and power he finds in the church (2017, 36). Even though he feels personally empowered by the music, community, and preaching, he disapproves of the Christian practice. This entails a rejection of Christendom’s violent history and his congregation’s behavior, but it also presents his personal struggle to believe and trust God and the Bible. Furthermore, his letters underline love, recognition of history, and mutual effort as the methods to heal from America’s violent past and present.

The teachings of Pentecostalism are also essential to understanding Baldwin’s church experience and arguments about social justice. This Protestant Christian denomination follows a literal interpretation of the Bible and this entails a favorable relationship to early Christianity. “Early Christianity” refers to the earliest stages of Christian religion that Baldwin believes were destroyed when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity in the fourth

century. His understanding of early Christianity is discussed in-depth by Douglas Field, who claims that Baldwin's Pentecostal involvement led him to seek a more traditional and original religion (2008, 440). Baldwin's upbringing in the Pentecostal church arguably influenced his view on the society; however, I find that he separates himself from Pentecostalism in the portrayal of his conversion and the church. Although he was religious for three years as a result of the cultural and social elements that the church offered, the connection to Pentecostalism is only apparent, when we know that the community favors early Christianity. Despite the apparent philosophical link between his Pentecostal past and his ethical understanding of early Christianity, we cannot ignore his rejection of the institutional structure of his church.

With this context in mind, I suggest that *Fire* negotiates Baldwin's personal faith and the public and more official role of religion. Although discussed together in the letters, this thesis focuses separately on the social criticism of public religion in part one and personal religion in part two. Thus, distinguishing between the way Christians act towards others, and the connection people, including Baldwin, have with God. Because *Fire* prioritizes interpersonal relationships, the public role of religion becomes a more significant focus in my discussion.

In *Fire*, the official position of religion exists between religious institutions which adhere to religions – such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – and social structures. The social structures are formed and sustained by religious people. Although seemingly similar, religious institutions refer to the actions of religious communities and the people who adhere to them. In contrast, social structures describe political situations created by systems that favor specific racial and religious groups. Lynch, who argues for a dialectical approach to Baldwin's work, lists “the clergy's cynicism and negative theology and the congregation's generally unloving attitude” (2000, 34) as the reasons for his departure from the church.

These elements also become essential to my reading of public religion in *Fire*. I understand “negative theology” to indicate that faith and religious commitment are rooted in guilt and self-interests. It presents a similar dogma of distinction, which I have presented as theological or ethical absolutes in Chapter One. The chapter concluded that there was no point to religion without love, and there is an increased emphasis on similar unloving institutions in *Fire*. The criticism of the unloving attitude is arguably not just limited to the congregation but is something that Baldwin finds Christian people have been guilty of since the beginning of Christianity. Accordingly, I see the church institutions’ lack of charity as the core issue of official and personal religion.

Expanding on the discussion on the clergy’s “negative theology”, the second part explores Baldwin’s attitude towards aspects of personal religion and demonstrates his hostility towards God. Similar to how Baldwin argues that Christians of all races are unloving and often morally corrupt, he also claims that God is white and ignores his struggles as a black man. Personal expression of religion also exists in the use of scriptures, and in Baldwin’s case, implementing biblical allusion brings about a presence of Christianity. He also employs biblical allusions to underline and express his ideas and goals concerning universal love.

Analyzing the two ways religion is executed shows that Baldwin’s main goal or argument is that Christian love should be re-introduced in its original form. Such a set of beliefs would eliminate the racial divide, political elements, and the blind commitment to interpretations of scriptures and God. What I define as personal love does not necessarily reflect the personal religion, seeing that it affects believers’ relationship with God; however, both universal and personal love are equally crucial in official religion. Looking at social justice and racial equality efforts together with his religious experience provide an effective

insight into the paradox or irony of his letters; he learns about love and compassion in the church, but ultimately leaves it because the congregation fails to apply what they preach.

The Public and Official Role of Religion

Religious Institutions

Besides Christianity, *Fire* also introduces religious institutions that adhere to Judaism and Islam. Judaism enters Baldwin's discussion by way of his classmates, who are critical of his Christian faith. His meeting with Jewish children leads him to consider the similarities in their scriptures and eventually question the sovereignty Christianity claims to have. Even though he approves of their behavior, Baldwin never considers adopting the religion of his peers (2017, 38). When introduced to Islam and the Nation of Islam (NOI) by its leader Muhammad, Baldwin compares the leader's politicized interpretation of the Muslim faith to Christianity, and, despite the NOI's emphasis on black people as the original people, argues for similarities in their active political role. His rejection of the NOI is, unlike his rejection of Christianity, almost exclusively focused on rejecting this political and new religious movement as an institution. Baldwin introduces Islam to his narrative after concluding that if God cannot create an inclusive and non-violent church, "then it is time we got rid of Him" (2017, 46). As a juxtaposition to the Christian God, who Baldwin understands as white, the NOI claims that God is black. Although Baldwin considers the validity of a black God, he never attempts to convert or explore the Muslim faith, much like in the case of Judaism above. Still, *Fire* details an empathetic approach to how African Americans, in particular, might find the NOI to be an attractive political and religious movement. Baldwin reasons that, "[t]he white God has not delivered them; perhaps the Black God will" (2017, 54). This statement illustrates his compassion and initial interest in the movement.

Nevertheless, the Muslim religious institution also enacts familiar emotions, and upon meeting Muhammad, Baldwin feels as if he has returned to his Pentecostal church, and experiences guilt about the cigarettes in his pocket (2017, 56). The religious communities' rules have kept him from drinking and smoking, and a past feeling of shame arises due to his possession of something forbidden. Earlier in the letters, Baldwin rejects the Christian churches' implementation of guilt as a motivating factor for faith. The repetition of shame brought forth by the cigarettes implies a conflated view of Christianity and the NOI as regulatory and manipulative institutions. This feeling of guilt also indicates Baldwin's rejection of the modes through which the NOI supports its values. In my view, Baldwin's willingness to reject the NOI as a religious institution, although it offers an empowering message, underlines the former vulnerability that the Christian church exploited.

This leads us to Christianity, the religion of Baldwin's church and the subject of his references to historical and contemporary dominant white countermen. Because Baldwin opposes these different black and white church institutions, I see them as a shared "institutionalized Christianity". However, when I distinguish the institutions, I refer explicitly to his Pentecostal church or the authoritative interpretations by white Christian groups. Similar to the NOI, Baldwin's presentation of the Christian institutions show a rather politicized set of beliefs. Sherkat reminds us that collective religiosity can also include politicized interpretations, which one can reject without rejecting the religion (2015, 378). Despite this, *Fire* presents people's religiosity that adheres to an openly politicized Christian institution. The politicized actions are, in Baldwin's perspective, the actuality of the Christian churches in the U.S. and world history. Likewise, Baldwin interprets the collective institution of white American churches as a representation of oppression due to its historical embodiment of power. By bringing in these historical and contemporary elements, Baldwin focuses on the collective religious experience, and the public role religion holds. I argue that

the author's perspective on the historical misuse of religion is at the core of his contemporary issues with the institution. It also presents the background for the actions of the Black Church.

A crucial factor for Baldwin's wish for social change is to acknowledge the way white colonial powers have created a Christian narrative of virtue in their favor. When he explores historical white Christianity, he looks back to the first centuries CE and argues that religious institutions' politicization changed the nature of Christian practice. In doing so, he creates an image of a continuation from the fourth to the twentieth century. Comparing the political situation in the 1960s to the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire serves as an example of his assessment of Christian powers and illustrates how embedded the western interpretations of the Christian practice seem to be. Central to his idea of "Early Christianity" as a solution is the re-introduction of a religion stripped of its violent and profitable aspects. In Baldwin's view, bringing back early Christianity would return a "hope of liberation [but] it also imposes a necessity for great change" (2017, 44). With such a change,

America and all the Western nations will be forced to re-examine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long. (2017, 44)

His suggestion once again demands an effort from both black and white Americans. However, Baldwin appears increasingly pessimistic about people voluntarily giving up a dominant position. The passage shows that he presents the Western nations' current position and wealth as something "sacred" (2017, 44). The notion of the "sacred" connects their assumed wealth and authoritative position to their idea of religious commitment, thus, suggesting a God-given social position. The tone of the passage is also confrontational as Baldwin demands that those in power should re-examine themselves and give up their economic gains and influential positions. This is also noteworthy because it suggests an openness to Christianity under the right circumstances.

The idea of a return to a Christian religion before it embodies power also attests to Baldwin's Pentecostal background; however, Pentecostalism is also subjected to his critique. The actions of the church, which he later describes as "monstrous" (2017, 40), include its financial greed and hostility towards the white world. *Fire* describes the congregation's abandonment of its imagined communal love when the service ends, with the "salvation stopp[ing] at the church door" (2017, 40-41). Claiming that salvation never exists outside the church, Baldwin expands his social critique of Christianity to include black churches. O'Neale describes the churchmen as "pitiful imitators of the hypocritical whites whom they despised" (1988, 134). The church members act according to the teachings of the clergy, which means that they limit whom they treat with love. Witnessing these actions makes Baldwin question the attitudes Christians have towards those who believe in something different.

Considering these internal issues of his church, I find that there are significant similarities between his portrayal of the church and the Avenue. The specific religious institution initially becomes the opposite of the Avenue because it represents a powerful and ethical force compared to the sin-filled street. However, the two arenas, being the Avenue and the church, appear noticeably similar to Baldwin. Their similarity comes to the fore when Baldwin decides to join the community and meets one of the pastors who asks him, "[w]hose little boy are you?" (2017, 32). Immediately, Baldwin recognizes the phrase from the Avenue where "whores and pimps and racketeers" (2017, 23) had asked him this same question. He does not deny that he wanted to belong to someone, and this was bound to happen in one way or the other in Harlem. The line illustrates the similarities of the people in the two institutions, despite their different attitudes. Where he rejected being anyone's boy on the Avenue, he eventually "surrendered to a spiritual seduction" (2017, 32) – and belonged to the pastor. Thus, the elements of the Avenue he had feared appear in the church as well. The "spiritual

seduction” suggests a contradictory transformation where temptation enhances faith and the sacred and the secular meet. Such a contradiction or even hypocrisy fits his church experience, where the congregation prioritized their religious commitment over ethical actions. It also ties the church further to the Avenue as he describes the seduction as a sign of depravity (2017, 30). Similarly, this revelation of similarities illustrates that the entire essence of collective faith does not appeal to him after he learns about his church’s selfishness and economic gains.

His critique of Christians invites the question of whether Baldwin completely rejects the collective practice of religion. Jacqueline Mattis and Robert Jagers’ study “Religiosity and Spiritually in the Lives of African Americans” highlights the vital role of African American churches and argues that they function as the creators of shared social responsibility and enforce a sense of community (2001, 529). In *Fire*, the church’s sense of community is one of the factors that attract Baldwin to join, and he remains in the pulpit because “power and glory” (2017, 36) are at the center of the social, musical, and religious experience. He even claims that this period was the most joyous and powerful experience he can remember. Albeit briefly, Baldwin introduces what I underlined as a vital feature in *Mountain* and *Amen* when he explains why he stayed in the church for three years. Still, this explanation appears noticeably less significant than in his early fiction, and does not describe the entire picture, which includes his accommodation of other ideological interpellations by the church.

Another example of the young Baldwin’s commitment to Christianity is when he brings a Jewish friend home. His father is furious and slaps him across the face, to which young Baldwin, trying to offend his father, responds by saying that his Jewish friend is a “better Christian than you are” (2017, 39), thus demonstrating how the son values the teachings of Christianity. Whereas his father attends church and preaches his religion, he values the Jewish boy as his best friend. However, his father does not see him as “saved”

(2017, 38), showing the church's prejudice towards non-Christians. This incident presents his use of Christian sentiments to sound his criticism. It also serves as an example of his suggestion that religion and religious commitment do not align. Baldwin does not tell his father that his Jewish friend is a good person or, alternatively, a better person than his father; instead, he tells him he is less Christian than him. His remark implies that "Christian" is almost synonymous with ethical or kind, at least according to his own wishes.

These memories of being in the pulpit and his idea of Christians illustrate the complicated relationship he has with religion, even as a young boy. Seeing that it is easy to draw parallels between his father and Gabriel Grimes and Luke Alexander, the message also suggests his individual religiosity, which has to exist outside the church. It appears as if Baldwin had aimed to choose an individual path without the repressive nature offered in religious institutions. He takes with him some principles but leaves behind the rigid structures. Although Baldwin still fears the outside after he rejects the NOI; he denies the premises of the religious institution and no longer appears to be desperate to enter a religious community and a specific devout role. Like Judaism and Christianity before it, Baldwin rejects the institution as he wants to support love and equality rather than a social system that he thinks the NOI turns to its advantage. Looking at his disagreement with the empowering practice of Islam proves that he has not only rejected Christianity because of his fellow citizens' politicized interpretations. Instead, it is also because he sees through the teachings and policies of his own church. Yet, Baldwin remains sympathetic towards his peers' position as subjects to interpellation and apparent victims of oppression from the social structures that the white religious institutions enforce.

Religious Social Structures

Christianity has historically had a dominant and influential position in the U.S. The religious leaders' authoritative position and use of Christianity makes the specific set of beliefs a determiner for certain American social structures. These social structures often discriminate against non-whites and allude to the concept of coloniality in *Fire*. Anibal Quijano introduces the concept of coloniality as a hierarchical system of power which, he argues, continues from the colonial period to the present (2000, 215-17). Although this concept is mostly applied in Latin American studies, often targeting gender and race, I believe it can also be applied to see the lasting effects of dominant religious groups in the U.S. Drexler-Dreis defines coloniality as the cultural and epistemological frameworks, like theology, which occurred at the hands of colonialism, but which has remained after political decolonization (2015, 252). With the help of religious narratives and use of Christian philosophy, those in power were able to defend their actions and, therefore, also condemn and define others (Bartkowski and Matthews 2006, 174-75). O'Neale refers to this social structure as the "evil-oriented identity that white Christian culture had imposed upon [black America]" (1988, 126).

Accordingly, Baldwin's experience in the church in the 1960s is a result of the white leaders' use of religion as a tool to hold power. An example of this is the conclusion that the entire system favors white people and, ultimately, they "hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks (intrinsically, that is: God decreed it so)" (2017, 30). The parenthetical reference shows Baldwin's idea of the more direct influence of religion on structural differences between black and white Americans. The setting of Harlem becomes a representation of how the economic differences in the country's past and present continue to

create social differences. Writing from this setting, Baldwin explores the unequal social structures embedded in Christianity.

Fire goes back and forth between a display of religious coloniality and the examples of white Christian colonial powers at the height of their influence. His attacks on white Christianity follow the critical approach of Du Bois' "Will the Church Remove the Color Line?" and establish the white churches as an oppressive force (2000c). Such an attitude positions churches as defenders and, at times, supporters of slavery and the continued enforcement of social differences after the abolishment (Du Bois 2000, 174-75). To demonstrate this social structure, Baldwin uses examples of violent Christian groups that claimed others inferior and thus adopted violence to oppress them.

The attention to this issue also aligns closely with that of the black theology movement; however, where Cone sees a possibility of reforming the perception of Christianity inside the church, Baldwin rejects the church's willingness to change. Chapter One presented similarities with the inclusion of biblical counterparts and demonstration of black cultural expression. *Fire* continues implementing methods, which were later formatted by black theologians; the most apparent is Baldwin's critical reaction to existing social structures. Edward Antonio's article "Black theology" illuminates different definitions of the theory, and highlights black theologians' motivation to show the "contradiction between racism and demands of Christian faith" (2007, 81). Because of the resulting attacks on black humanity, the aim for many black theologians is to "critically reflect on what it means to be black in such a context" (Antonio 2007, 82). Equivalently, Baldwin underlines these contradictions and explores how the historical whiteness and use of Christianity has affected him and his peers. This appears to employ Cone's sources of black theology, which emphasizes the decline in Christian traditions due to the Roman empire and presents an understanding of the black experience (2010, 24, 32). However, these sources, and black

theology in general, emphasize God as a “God of the oppressed” (Cone 2010, 2), and oppressed people’s liberation activity as a signifier of God’s role (Cone 2010, 3). However, similar to Baldwin’s disbelief that the churches are willing to change, he does not appear hopeful that God will play a similar role in America as he did in Egypt, according to the Bible. This comparison to black theology is valuable because it demonstrates the close alignment Baldwin had with religious ideas, and also shows how he breaks away from them.

Baldwin first reference to colonial interpretations of the Bible appears in the epigraph of “Down at the Cross”, where he quotes Rudyard Kipling’s *The White Man’s Burden* from 1899. Where many interpretations, *Mountain* included, viewed Moses as a representative and an embodiment of liberation, Kipling used the verses during the Spanish-American war in defense of the American colonization of the Philippines. The author positions the white man as Moses and portrays the Israelites’ resistance to liberation (1903, 79-81). The idea of resistance appears to come from the Book of Exodus 16:2-3, which describes the Jewish people’s complaints about hunger, and suggests that Egypt provided food to their slaves. Kipling’s claim allowed people’s own comparisons to the chosen people, but used the role of Moses to defend the white man’s domination (Lackey 2009, 580). Baldwin’s epigraph, followed by a verse from “Down at the Cross” establishes an immediate demonstration of the connection between American imperialism and the church (Young III 2014, 109). It also opens the letter with an example of contradictory interpretations.

Demonstrating a similar destructive understanding of the Bible, *Fire* also uses the figure of Ham to show both the historical hypocrisy of white Christians and the unloving nature of the Bible’s interpreters (2017, 38, 41, 48). Chapter One considered his introduction of Ham in *Mountain* as a symbol of not receiving love and destined sin. In *Fire*, on the other hand, the story of Ham’s curse introduces the whiteness of the Bible and its interpretations. The biblical curse was employed by white Christian Americans to justify holding slaves.

Baldwin feels “predestined to be a slave” (2017, 38) because of this biblical story and because “this is what Christendom effectively believed” (2017, 38). Thereby he introduces yet another struggle and question from Edwards’ Calvinistic sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, which refers to the possibility of predestination. Instead of a future in the afterlife or the purgatory, Baldwin’s predestination is his role in an American society.

Although claiming that the Bible was written and translated by white men, who might have influenced its content, Baldwin focuses on the interpretation of the text. He views whites as descendants of the biblical figure Cain who killed his brother Abel in Genesis 4:8 (2017, 41). Cain is Baldwin’s impression of white Christians, but the example also shows the Bible’s social and political flexibility. This attack on the social interpretations of the Bible suggests, similarly to *Mountain*, the possibility of construction of imposed self-hate. The people who wrote this story were most likely acting with “divine inspiration” (2017, 37), meaning that the visions from God were individual and might have differed from others’ perceptions. When Baldwin talks about the biblical story of Ham, he once again presents his knowledge about the biblical texts and uses Christian examples to argue against the religious behavior. Although the black Christians’ willingness to accept the prophecy of Ham is suggested, he ultimately uses it to underline how white Christians behaved (2017, 38, 48). While the interpretation of Ham’s curse certainly highlights the violent traditions Christians have adopted by using biblical references, it also marks the starting point of Baldwin’s departure from the church.

The function of the social structures is evident in *Fire*’s introduction of the “Puritan Yankee equation of virtue with well-being” (2017, 28), a political element created and supported by Christian belief. The idea made an unequal financial system adhere to and follow religious faith. Hence, people believed that the western population’s wealth, gained in the name of Christianity, confirmed God’s help (2017, 45). Baldwin does not find that the system applied to either atheist or Christian African Americans, since it rewarded white

Christians even though they acted without any “striking adherence to the Christian virtues” (2017, 28). Rather than stating that the Christians do not follow particular virtues, Baldwin specifies that the virtues he expects are indeed Christian. Similarly to the confrontation with his father, he continues to refer to an ethical and good-intentioned true Christianity, which he longs for but never witnesses.

The argued false morality among white Christians also affects the people in Baldwin’s street who resort to violence and crime. Through different examples, Baldwin demonstrates the alleged unfairness of the criminalization of black people, claiming that white people “had robbed black people of their liberty and who profited by this theft every hour that they lived” (2017, 28). The historical background of colonial Christian actors and the economic differences also underline why many black people in his neighborhood do not feel guilty when they steal. When servants stole from white homes, the homeowners were allegedly aware of it but let it happen because it underlined their feeling of moral superiority (2017, 28). Baldwin presents both groups as criminals but emphasizes that whites had the power to continue with their imagined moral narrative. This passage serves as an example of Baldwin’s tendency to show how the historical patterns of inequality extend to his upbringing. Lackey, who analyses African American atheism in literature, presents counter-reactions by authors who, similar to Baldwin, are subjected to suppression at the hands of the God concept (2007, 3). I find Lackey’s explanation of a communal rejection of the God concept to describe Baldwin’s attitude to the hypocrisy of criminality accurately; removing the God concept would not eliminate the political forces that oppress certain groups. Instead, they would arguably lose the moral superiority used to justify the political agenda (2007, 1). This is why Baldwin chooses to start with religion when he addresses American challenges.

The sinful actions of his peers, whom he fears he will resemble, are consequences of an alleged God-sent economic system. The members of his neighborhood never had the

economic benefits their white peers were able to enjoy. Instead, only the white Americans gained financial wealth. By the same token, this system suggests that God allowed inequality. Baldwin also introduces the quote “God is on our side” (2017, 44) by the South-African politician and apartheid supporter Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd in order to first identify the misconception about the changes the Roman Empire and other actors made to Christian practice. Using the quote from a man who suppressed the majority of the population in South Africa through the apartheid system to support a state driven by White Afrikaners presents the profound ignorance of religious narratives at the top of an oppressive social structure. Claiming that God was on their side shows how these assumptions of moral superiority could justify criminal behavior.

Looking at the effects of this structure in his community, Baldwin presents what he perceives as an inevitable consequence. When the white Christian groups of the 1960s act as if God were on their side, they demonstrate which actions reward wealth. Wanting to gain wealth, the people on the Avenue copy the apparent profitable behavior, and, as a result, they face subjection by the countrymen who claim to have a strong moral ground and who ultimately determine their poverty (2017, 28). His remark appears to be the product of his observations, which implies a distinct connection between the “white gaze” and institutional Christianity, and the consequences this social structure has for the black community.

Baldwin’s secular ideas are a tool for liberation from personal constraints in a religious community and structural oppression. However, he does not see his personal lack of faith and rejection of the church as the answer; instead, he suggests that for them to gain complete liberation, the entire God concept needs to change fundamentally. Beyond this critique, the author moves into a more confrontational and optimistic approach at the end of the essay. After addressing Christianity and the NOI, and denouncing their role in the social justice battle, his approach becomes non-religious. Outside the church or the religious

political movements, Baldwin can seemingly focus on the challenges the country faces and how a partnership between black and white people can fix it. He now proposes changing features, such as the hostility towards the outside and the financial greed that he finds embedded in the Christian church.

End the “Racial Nightmare” with Love

A part of this structural change is also to introduce love as a core value. Lynch argues that Baldwin’s most significant objection to the Christian church and Christians in general does not necessarily relate to the external realities of political power, but the non-apparent love for others (1997, 287-88). Similarly to Lynch, I argue that *Fire*’s emphasis on love and equality demonstrates the problematic elements of the actions of Christian groups. As presented above, Baldwin rejects both the NOI and institutionalized Christianity mainly because of their inability to love everyone. Accordingly, love as an active and political action becomes Baldwin’s goal for himself and everyone else. Nevertheless, this goal raises the question about whether his idea of love and equality is religious or merely a secular attitude.

Baldwin’s emphasis on loving relationships starts in “My Dungeon Shook”, where he claims that his family needs to love each other to survive and that his nephew needs to survive because they love him (2017, 15). Here the author expresses the importance of love, which at this state seems to be an indisputable, and non-political and non-religious statement. His love for his nephew introduces a personal love, and after his proclamation, he moves on to seek a universal love. The topic of a universal love and Christians’ attitude towards love becomes a recurring issue and further highlights the origin of Baldwin’s political opinion.

Baldwin’s goal of a universal love in *Fire* is to seek a mutual love, but instead, his activism exists as an “asymmetrical love” (Farred 2015). Grant Farred, who introduces the term, draws the comparison of Baldwin’s gesture of loving everyone, including those who

hate him, to the Matthew gospel (2015, 294). Matthew 5:44-47, specifically, states that one should love one's enemies. This ability to love asymmetrically appears at the end of the first letter when he tells his nephew to accept his white countrymen and "accept them with love" (2017, 16). Although I agree with Farred's study on the self-less love in *Fire* and Baldwin's ability to love without reciprocation, it is also apparent that he explicitly requests and prioritizes a mutual love between all religions and races. As a solution to the oppressive politics, he suggests that white people need to learn "how to accept and love themselves and each other" (2017, 27), and one of his expectations of God is to "make us larger, freer, and more loving" (2017, 46). This hope suggests an attitude similar to the idea of agape.

His wish to love others also occupies his meeting with and rejection of the NOI. There seems to be no motivation for joining another religious institution that fails to love its peers. His final pledge is that all people need to come together to change the course of the country "like lovers" (2017, 89). The repetition underlines the vital role love holds. His examples of historical and ongoing injustice and attitudes contribute to *Fire's* overall political message of gaining universal acceptance and equality. Author and civil rights leader Howard Thurman also explores the issue of loving enemies in the context of racial oppression and suggests to get rid of the enemy status and neutralize the uneven relationship (2003, 54). This suggestion means that the privileged and underprivileged need to realize each other's worth and value, requiring both parties to be free (Thurman 2003, 54-55). Although Thurman also suggests that a shared devotion to God will provide a common motivation for peace, Baldwin follows the similar requirements of mutual effort and freedom. His idea of acting like lovers demands both black and white people to participate. The comparison to Thurman demonstrates the similar message Baldwin had to many religious activists. It also exemplifies how he adopts these beliefs outside the church and without a shared devotion to God.

Baldwin arguably repeats the features I highlighted about his idea of love in Chapter One. Similar to *Mountain*, Baldwin demonstrates how he rejects the unloving church, and as presented in *Amen*, he continues to seek universal love. This raises the question of whether his active and political idea of love bespeaks Christianity. Because *Fire* is a testament to his ideas about his religiosity or lack thereof, I view his thoughts about love and religion as reflections of his personal views. This representation arguably shows that his idea of love has a religious background, but it exists as a non-religious phenomenon. Tracing Baldwin's ideas about love from a young age shows how this transition happened and illustrates his issues with the practices of the church. His relationship to God, which I will address in part two, is also a part of this attitude to love.

When Baldwin reflects upon the church, he concludes that “there [is] no love in the church” (2017, 40) and people do not to love everybody outside the church after all (2017, 41). Lynch's “Just Above my Head” connects Baldwin's writing and identity with his experience with Christian ideals, morality, and responsibility (1997). Similarly, Field, basing his argument on Baldwin's oeuvre and background in the Pentecostal church, argues that Baldwin inhabits an ongoing influence of Christian ideals of love in his texts (2008, 450-53). His conclusion suggests that in order to understand Baldwin's work, one needs to realize the author's ideal of an active and political love as the motivating factor for every action (Field 2008, 450). The change Baldwin wants to see connects his social justice efforts with his religious background. However, this connection remains an element of his past.

Baldwin's attitude to love is the most unequivocal evidence of a rejection of religious institutions. Yet, because these institutions base themselves on a politicized interpretation of Christianity, it becomes increasingly challenging to rule out religious sources. Farred, who connects Baldwin's love to the Matthew Gospel and God's commandments, sees Baldwin's literary expression as profoundly Christian, and although he acknowledges that Baldwin

rejects institutionalized Christianity, he sees his idea of love as a testament to his commitment to God (2015, 301). Alternatively, I read his love as earthy and humanistic. His ideal of a universal love arguably comes from the Christian faith, but not the church or God.

Furthermore, Baldwin claims that the church told him to love everyone; a message which aligns with the Matthew gospel, and other verses like John 13:34. However, despite the similarities of the idea of agape and his universal love, Baldwin never expresses the will of God or connects his commitment to loving others to God's love. In other words, he never displays an inner will to love people because God loves everyone. Nevertheless, such a feeling would be impossible because he rejects the notion that God loves him. Instead, his love seems to be regarding the compassion he feels when he witnesses hate.

Baldwin rejects Christian people's actions, but never disregards religion completely in this context. An example of this is when he lists his expectations of religious people. In order to become a moral human being, he

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. (2017, 46)

The issue of being more loving towards others presents a challenge that God can help people overcome, but Baldwin doubts that this is realistic. Although Baldwin might describe this love as a continuation of the love he has read about in the scriptures, the loss of faith in God and his rejection of the church suggests humanist love. Leaving behind the unethical parts people have adopted into their religion, a helpful Christian faith would require a loving attitude. Baldwin's suggestion for a universal love is never fully explored in the church setting either. However, he hopes it will come to fruition within the Christian religion. Until then, he apparently cannot take part in the church community.

Fire expresses a general dissatisfaction with collective and official religious behavior and Christians who are unable or unwilling to practice what they preach. The hypocritical actions were not just present in his community, but signifies a continuation of the practice which sustained slavery and which developed during the establishment of Christian nations surrounding Rome (2017, 44). Religiosity in the public sphere and within churches is arguably political, making the commitment to collective religion impossible when rejecting politicized elements. This is where the paradox of Baldwin's religiosity is most apparent as he learns about love from Christianity, but eventually rejects the church because of his own emphasis on love. As Baldwin frees himself from the guilt and fear of Christianity, he can view the actions of the people around him and realize that they do not fit his moral standard. There is a possibility of a dual relationship to the church. However, despite his love of preaching and the music, Baldwin's idea of a positive Christian community does not exist. He also has a significantly smaller emphasis on black religious cultural expression than in his previous works. Because of his philosophy of love and equality, he seems to position himself as an hopeful outsider to collective religion.

Personal Religion

A Relationship With God

Baldwin's account of his individual religious behavior, which is influenced by the history of the political situation in the US, has a complex and ambiguous nature. Although individual religion exists next to the collective experience of religiosity, religious organizations, and communal rituals also enforce these personal sets of beliefs (Sherkat 2015, 377). By the same token, the negative experiences of collective religion also minimize personal religiosity. This shows that social factors possibly prevent Baldwin from having a loving relationship with God. The relation is only explored when he attends the church, and after the visit, he seems to

prioritize interpersonal relationships in its place. Although his relationship with God is the most important factor in the moment, the description of the conversion re-introduces social pressure created by ethical absolutes and theology based on guilt, fear, and sin. With this also comes an idea of members blindly following their leaders. Seeing that the conversion he undergoes mirrors John Grimes' experience on the church floor in *Mountain*, I find that it presents a revivalist conversion. However, having discussed the motivation, performance, and feeling of relief in the previous chapter, I shift my focus away from these specific conversion motifs. Instead, the conversion becomes a manifestation of the extensive influence that social structures have on Baldwin's connection to God. So much so that their relationship becomes unachievable. Connecting his experience with white Christians to his personal experience with God shows how Du Bois notion of religion and race does not only speak to the social structures but describes the relationship Baldwin has with God and scriptures. *Fire* also explores the motivation behind other people's relationship with God and whether this relationship is truly loving. I view his critique of their relationship with God as an enlargement of his idea of love, which broadens the concern to include the relationship other people have to the supernatural.

Before his commitment to the church, Baldwin explains his "prolonged religious crisis" (2017, 23) in his introduction, and admits, "I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid – afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without" (2017, 23). His fear implies that he is evil due to the "sins" he commits. The remark is a product of his constant fear of committing sins, and illustrates the effects of the church's fear-tactics and hidden hails for devotion. It also shows that he fears the physical threats to his body on the Avenue. In order to solve this, he looks for a gimmick, which he finds is his preaching (2017, 29). His gimmick is supposed to be a tool that occupies and saves him from his possibly straying path.

Starting to attend church also entails that he begins to seek God. Lynch maintains that although Baldwin underlines the Christian role in “condoning of racism and injustice toward African Americans [, he also] develops a theology based on Christian ideals and on his individual quest for a loving God” (Lynch 1997, 285). While I agree with the argument about the duality of Baldwin’s religion, I would add that the quest for a relationship with God as expressed in *Fire* is a result of these unequal and unloving social and institutional structures of religion. His quest for a loving God is also temporary. Mirroring the conversion experience in *Mountain*, Baldwin’s terrifying and dramatic fall to the church floor occurs because of social and, consequently, internal pressure. The conversion account arguably testifies more to the issues of religion and racism than the pressure from the congregation or his father.

Baldwin’s conversion takes place during a visit to the church when he is “struck” or “slain” by the spirit. The author recalls lying on the ground until the next morning when he rises again as a saved man (2017, 33-35). Before he rises, he is seeking God to understand why someone so powerful and loving would allow racism and violence. Mirroring other people of color who were ignored by God when subjected to violence, Baldwin claims he was “yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me” (2017, 33). This passage illustrates the feeling of being black in a white country, thus bringing in his fellow citizens into the narrative. Lying on the ground, he feels that there is no God who is watching over him. If God had been truly almighty, he had allowed, or even decided, to cast black people to the very bottom of social hierarchy. This is when he establishes that God is indeed white (2017, 34). Although Baldwin realizes the unloving nature of the white God, he decides to join the church. Initially, he feels relief and continues attending the church after experiencing “a glimpse of the loving God” (Lynch 2000, 48), to which he holds on to.

Similarly, as discussed above, when describing the inequality around him, he parenthetically comments that the system exists because “God decreed it so” (2017, 30). The

quote directly associates God with the effects of racism. The inequality around him creates an “inspiring fear” (2017, 27), which motivates him to seek acceptance by God. Similarly, he realizes that he cannot endorse God because he lives in a country whose leaders embrace inequality. When he reflects upon the background and effects of this inequality, Baldwin follows other black humanists who have questioned the idea of theodicy when talking about African American suffering (Field 2008, 444). Without mentioning theodicy specifically, Baldwin raises similar questions about God’s will and power.

Moreover, witnessing black Christians he realizes that “all the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into the church” (2017, 31-32). This wall indicates a barrier towards the world that he cannot escape because of the perception people have of black men, and consequently, his own feelings of self-hate, guilt, and fear. The conversion temporarily relieves him from being “guilty” and “frightened” (2017, 33) – feelings that were initially enhanced when he started attending the church. Similarly to Chapter One, his experience presents a temporary contentment as a result of responding to the church’s hailing. These feelings are also seemingly constructed by society’s view of him, which is demonstrated in the example of Ham’s curse.

Although he refers to the people around him, who never attempt to help him, this conversion story primarily focuses on the unloving God figure who allows oppression. After spending the night on the church floor, Baldwin feels saved and released from the feeling of guilt (2017, 34). The sense of evil he feels within him, in the opening pages of the essay is seemingly gone, and he embraces the force that has led him to the floor. The background behind his attraction is seemingly this false idea that he has become a better man once he engages himself in the church. Because of this realization, he commits himself to and

preaches about a God that does not seem to serve him. Nevertheless, he indicates that the fact that God has chosen him in the moment of the conversion is enough.

The description of his experience in the church shows that he has been saved and suppressed by the same force. By realizing the whiteness of God when he accepts Christianity, Baldwin shows the significance of his relief. His conversion serves as an example of his desperation to be accepted and saved. To Baldwin, the sin he and the people in Harlem supposedly inhabit proves God's passivity or role as an accomplice in white Christendom's criminalization of black men. Accordingly, his relationship with God will always be clouded by the way white Christians treated him and America's "racial nightmare" (2017, 89).

It is easy to compare his relationship and initial attraction towards God to John Grimes and David Alexander. The comparison bases itself on the idea that God could provide the same role as what some scholars refer to as an "earthly father" (O'Neale 1988, 133). Lynch even suggests that "Baldwin creates Luke [Alexander] as a consoling projection of the father or stepfather he always wanted" (2000, 62). Although, only briefly, *Fire* suggests a strained relationship with his religious stepfather when he introduces his Jewish friend. Although it might be the case for his personal experience, this relationship is ultimately not relevant for the way *Fire* presents his ideas about religion. Moreover, Baldwin never suggests that God can hold the same position as an earthly father would.

Baldwin also deems the rest of the church's relationship with God at large insincere, and this observation makes him more suspicious of Christians. He realizes that people feel they have to love God because they are afraid of going to Hell, rather than "to love the Lord *because they loved Him*" [emphasis in original] (2017, 37). This realization leads him to question the intentions of everyone in the church. In doing so, he argues that the love in the church is a "mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair" (2017, 40). This self-hate and

despair indicate that the racist ideas, like the comparison to Ham and the church's rigid ethical system, create a sense of vulnerability. The vulnerability and desperation find refuge in the idea that religious commitment is more important than actions and individual religiosity. In the street, Christian girls scare Baldwin in the same manner as their persuasive message about his sins and their ability to save him.

Considering these examples, I agree with Lynch that the church seems to base its love on "secular motives and cynical behavior" (1997, 287). Baldwin's remarks about the congregation suggest that the self-serving motivation behind faith minimizes the validity of this relationship. This self-serving motivation suggests the congregation's tendency to answer when the church is hailing them in. Thus, their motivation to stay hopeful is somewhat based on the idea that God will eventually save them. They are possibly further motivated by storefront churches' encouragement of self-expression and youth preachers. These factors are apparent in Baldwin's internal thoughts when he starts to believe that a religious gimmick will protect him from external dangers and create a feeling of being chosen. Still, there is a sense of manipulation by the clergy and congregation demonstrated in the Christian girls' literal calls for the importance of salvation. By attacking the validity and nature of the church members' personal faith, I find that Baldwin retains the elements from *Mountain* and *Amen*, where he views the developments from the outside, and where the politics of the Black Church is at the center of his critique.

Biblical Allusions

The personal connection to the supernatural and lack thereof is evident in his relationship with God, but personal influence of religion also includes biblical references and allusions. I highlighted traces of this in the titles, but I want to introduce some examples from the text as well. These examples show that he lingers between being ironic and genuine when he

introduces the Bible. Together with the titles and references to spirituals, this biblical language affirms his connection to or admiration of traditional black interpretation of religion.

Baldwin uses the Bible differently here than his in previous works; and instead of using counterparts and comparisons to create universality, I uncover that his religious language creates a religious presence and effectively highlights injustice and hypocrisy. Clarence E. Hardy III's study *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* places more emphasis on the idioms, energy, and claims of morality in the essays than the critique of church culture (2003, 108). Furthermore, the scholar sees *Fire* as a "coded evangelical speech", used to reach a broader audience (Hardy III 2003, 80). It appears that by using this Christian message and style, more people would pay attention to the human and civil rights issues of the 1960s (Hardy III 2003, 80). Specifically, this may include the fellow citizens Baldwin warns his nephew about. I have a similar explanation of the inclusion of "them" in my chapter introduction, and like Hardy III, I see his religious language as a persuasive mechanism to express a critique of his Christian countrymen in the context of religious coloniality. Yet, I also believe that this stylistic feature is a testament to the continuing influence religion holds in Baldwin's life.

Upon witnessing the actions on the Avenue, he realizes that he himself is a "source of fire and temptation" (2017, 30). The word "fire" also appears in the title to signal a more substantial threat as the consequence of a life in sin. In this specific case, fire refers to the traditional idea of sin and destruction. The dangers of temptation are evidently a central part of Christianity, starting with the Book of Genesis. Therefore, Baldwin starts to believe that if he followed his temptations or imagined depravity, he would end up on the Avenue, which becomes an embodiment of his idea of Hell. Yet, after spending time in church, he realizes that "the blood of the Lamb had not cleansed me in any way whatever" (2017, 40), meaning that he had not changed, and neither had the reaction to his skin color. This line serves as an

example that his biblical language remains after he physically leaves the church. Simultaneously, the idea of fire and the blood of the lamb also show the harmful characterizations that religious symbolism builds on, which means that they implement an idea of people being evil. By approaching these biblical allusions, Baldwin uses language which has been used against him and signals an critical depiction of what is considered sin.

Later, the use of the metaphor of breaking bread together presents his hope that people would come together in peace. This idea also invites a broader audience to realize their current hypocrisy and present biblical motivation for change. Baldwin predicts that it will be “a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again, instead of the blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber that we have substituted for it” (2017, 43). “Breaking bread” is repeated in the Bible in reference to Jesus’ last supper, and the act of sharing a meal with others; I read Baldwin’s implication as a testament to a companionship (Acts 2:46). This quote serves as a final inclusion of Christian beliefs when looking and arguing for social justice while also indicating Baldwin’s commitment to early Christianity.

The Fire This Time

The title “The Fire This Time” comes from the 2016 essay collection by new and younger voices who discuss race in America (Ward 2016). The essay collection mirrors Baldwin’s letters and demonstrates a continuation of the 1960s racial injustices to their lives in the Black Lives Matter era. Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, which builds on and follows the style and subject matter of *Fire*, also expresses a less optimistic idea about the future of the country (2017). I suggest that both works demonstrate that the idea of a “fire” does not predict a future punishment day. Instead, it declares their view on the condition African Americans endure in the U.S. Although Baldwin is adamant that the country desperately needs to change, I find that he remains hopeful about the idea.

Still, there is a mentioned urgency when he speaks to his nephew. This urgency does not only occur because of his personal worries about his nephew's future but as a concern for the entire country. The solution to these worries is that people need to come together like lovers in order to save the American future. However, he is profoundly aware of how embedded Christian coloniality and social structures are in America. Because of these influential factors, love needs to be prioritized over religion, which means they must acknowledge previous missteps. If American Christian institutions and the NOI cannot accept people with this type of love, then there is no solution in sight. Faced with subjection, he cannot wait patiently in his church or accept the will and power of God.

Fire presents a more critical and demanding approach to Christianity than his first works. This transformation shows an engaged critique of what appears to be the core of his issues with religiosity. Baldwin describes the background to *Mountain* and *Amen* by showing that certain behaviors, like the failure to love, come from the meeting of colonialism and religion. The portrayal also shows his internal agony that is created by the established churches' practices. For certain historically white churches, this has meant that religion is a tool to oppress groups, whereas Baldwin's view of the church is that it is financially greedy, manipulative, and unloving. Similarly, God, as their point of worship, has never provided the help Baldwin needed as a black child. Aligning with the contemporary Black Power and civil rights movements, Baldwin sees the structural issues and the possible solutions for the country. However, as discussed above, he removes himself from these institutions by observing them from the outside and rejecting unacceptable passivity.

Fire also reflects a more significant issue for contemporary Christian African Americans and those who, throughout history, have rejected political features of the church, but who still continue to be religious to some extent. I believe that Lynch introduces a vital issue when he asserts that the timing of Baldwin's conversion is crucial. Considering the

church's role in African American social life, Lynch argues that Christianity is influential in Baldwin's work because he joins the church at such a critical time when his life could have gone in a different direction (1997, 290). His ongoing struggle with aspects of religion becomes increasingly difficult because the church "saves" him from potential dangers. In many ways, Baldwin exemplifies the complicated relationship between the black experience and Christianity. This confusion is best illustrated in his fall on the church floor, negotiating between two negatives. In that moment, he feels that his choice is between the oppression he experiences as a black man in America and the prospects of a manipulative church and an unloving God. Neither of these challenges can be solved before there is a mutual universal love.

Conclusion

James Baldwin's remained consumed with religion throughout his entire career, and my discussion on *Mountain, Amen,* and *Fire* has shown the complexity of this changing viewpoint. The selected works illustrate this ambiguous viewpoint through different approaches and genres. Exploring religiosity at two points of his career showed the different ways the novel, the play, and his letters detail the connection between race and religion. This link comes to the fore in characters' motivation to join the church, be it because of the social role the church plays or the prejudice they experience outside the church. Conversely, it testifies to the cultural presence of religion and the identity connected to what is often referred to as the Black Church. Keeping these important factors in mind, the entire thesis has disputed the notion of dichotomy in the study of religion in his texts, and underlined that one cannot classify Baldwin as either a secular or religiously-inclined author. As an alternative, religion is something Baldwin always struggles with, and its role in these texts cannot easily be understated. I have also argued that, because of the social landscape of the "racial nightmare" (2017, 89), his faith in God or commitment to religious institutions does not define his religiosity; instead, it exists in his philosophy, description of services, political opinion, and style. In addition to this, I have found it necessary to explore the cultural and theological aspects of his work to grasp the intricacy of religion and religiosity.

My discussion has examined three of Baldwin's works from a relatively early point in his career, and many of the arguments I have made have been disputed directly by the author in interviews or expressed in his later literary works. Two examples of this change are the dialogue and conversation he had with Margaret Mead and Nikki Giovanni. His 1971 conversation with Mead reflects on his Christian upbringing and confusion with white Christians. He admits to have learned about the importance of love and compassion from his religious mother, but rejects the suggestion that he has learned the same from the Bible, or in

the church community where they were served lies (Mead and Baldwin 1971, 86-89). In dialogue with Giovanni in 1987, Baldwin expressed his struggle to define God, and stated that he had claimed God as his father (1973, 38). These examples demonstrate how religion continues to be a concern, thus illustrating that *Mountain*, *Amen*, and *Fire* do not provide a final answer to the author's attitude to religion.

My reading of religion in the three works has not just explored the theological teachings, but also the institution at the center of characters' life. The dramatic services and conversion on the "threshing floor" demonstrate the Pentecostal connection with Holy Spirit and salvation. Considering the tradition of the Pentecostal denomination, I have explored the social and personal transformations that take place under such conversions. Although seemingly similar, I have chosen to highlight three different features and their significance for Baldwin's perception of religious experience. *Mountain*, for example, shows the social pressure leading up to a conversion; *Amen*, in turn, presents the temporary effect and the possibility of a positive outcome when withdrawing from the church; whereas *Fire* shows the author's awareness of God's role in his life. Instead of wondering whether God will save him or if he loves him, he knows that neither is true because of the way people, and particularly Christians, treat him.

Chapter One has shown that *Mountain* and *Amen* complement each other in their approach to the religious experience of a family. *Amen*, in particular, has often been ignored in discourses on Baldwin's literary output, but its setting and themes suggests a continuation of religious experiences in *Mountain*. I have argued that *Mountain*'s comparison of biblical stories and John's struggle connects Baldwin to African American religious traditions. The traditions I referred to were the historical use of spirituals and biblical stories, like the Exodus myth, and the 1970s black theology movement that formatted these comparisons to a liberation theology. Comparing Baldwin's works to historical black adoptions of Christianity

provides an compelling perspective on the ways in which he saw Christian allusion empowering. However, Baldwin also uses comparisons to biblical characters as a way to highlight the flexibility and hypocrisy of many interpretations of the Bible. In *Amen*, Baldwin adopts a different approach to supporting black religion and religious identity by using the dramatic genre to convey the experience of communion and effectively stage Pentecostalism in practice.

The violent racism in *Mountain* shows the role the church plays as a place of refuge from the terrors of the street. This terror of racism becomes a stark contrast to the possibility of love. Another effect of racism and inequality is a financial oppression that motivates the characters to seek their refuge in churches. However, inhabiting a feeling of following God also means that the clergy can create a strict set of rules that the congregation needs to follow. Unable to follow these rules the characters seek religious transformation to save themselves from the results of sin. The congregation's concerns ultimately exceed their willingness to love and express empathy. By considering the churches' conduct and the inequality outside the church, I have also presented the congregation's wish for salvation as an answer to ideological interpellation. This feeling of being chosen by God created a temporary contentment and joy. Baldwin does not describe these motivations as "pure" introductions to faith. In consequence, there seems to be limited hope for a genuine religion within a church community.

Chapter Two has argued that *Fire* moves partly away from the Black Church and raises a critical voice against the institutional Christian actors and the racism of American social structures that adhere to religious colonialism. The chapter takes a historical and cultural look at the 1960s, and explores how Baldwin's view on public and personal religion influences his rejection of certain aspects of Christianity. These include the historical interpretations of Christianity, God's claimed superiority, and people's failure to love one

another. I have also highlighted Baldwin's Pentecostal background to demonstrate the origin of his attraction to early Christianity. Furthermore, the chapter has also argued that the author's attacks on institutionalized Christianity and social structures raise different issues than the ones we find in his earlier works. By focusing on white Christian churches, politics and an unloving God, Baldwin positions religion as a source of inequality. Because *Mountain* and *Amen* exclusively describe institutional issues in the Black Church, I find that *Fire* functions as a necessary counterbalance to understanding his perception of religion in general. Accordingly, the essay becomes a call for liberation and action to all Americans, concluding that religion can and will delay this liberation progress. His goal of liberation also entails a separation from God, which contrasts with *Amen's* description of a loving God. Furthermore, Baldwin arguably remains committed religious allusions and often uses this language ironically to highlight the hypocrisy of Christianity.

Both chapters have argued that Baldwin's vision of love as an ethical stance is his greatest motivator, transcending whatever policy his church or country applies. For Baldwin, universal love and individual's ability to experience personal love are essential in his view on not just religion but also people in general. While *Mountain* demonstrates a church without love, *Amen* opens up for love while still being committed to God. *Fire* underlines the importance of both features with the claim, "I really mean that there was no love in the church" (2017, 40) and his continued emphasis on a mutual love. Showing the biblical roots of agape – a selfless, infinite love for all, enemies included, presents a close alignment with Baldwin's idea of love. However, as no church practices this limitless love and charity, it exists outside religious communities as earthly and humanist. The idea of love and its absence is crucial when considering Baldwin's literature, and it is ultimately related to every action in the three texts.

Although the three works present direct attacks on religion, I have found it vital to demonstrate the nuances in his attitude. Dismissing his critique as a proof of his secularity minimizes the significance of religious institutions in Baldwin's life in the historical periods the works are set in. The social structures that *Fire* explains, and *Mountain* and *Amen* play out, make the historical role of religion and race a useful starting point for understanding the way Baldwin explores these issues. Analyzing the texts with the use of African American religious thought and Du Bois' approach to race and religion, have shown that religious experiences in Baldwin's work are entirely dependent on black and white interpretations of Christianity. Because his country endorses violence towards and oppression of black men, Baldwin can never genuinely experience the church and Christianity. Following West and Glaude Jr.'s idea of incorporating social context in theological reflection also provided insight into the joy and suffering his characters experience (2003, xvi). It also shows how black religious expression interacts with existing political aspects of culture and cultural identity. By simply focusing on the descriptions and the staging of the church experiences or analyzing his biblical allusion, we neglect how different interpretations of religion influence Baldwin's writing and how the black experience informs religious behavior.

Reading the three works together has proved to be an effective way to study Baldwin's attitudes on religion. This change is apparent in the presentation of the dread of Christianity in *Mountain*, to his challenge to the unloving church in *Amen*, and finally in his direct demands of his fellow countrymen in *Fire*. Their different genres demonstrate similar scenarios but from varying vantage points, and I have argued that the narration, performance and, last but not least, his personal reflections on the issue provide a comprehensive insight into the religious experience. The thesis has also shown the important role religion has in positive and negative terms not just in literature and self-expression, but also in people's lives. The

argument that the church provides support and suffering can be valid for other religious communities as well, and his accounts suggest a somewhat universal experience.

Testifying to Baldwin's contributions in religious and political literary discourse, the idea of a white God has also been explored further. This notion of a white God comes from a communal experience of suffering at the hands of white Christian colonialism and coloniality. The idea was first discussed by Du Bois who wonders if God is white, which Baldwin takes for granted. As a part of the Black Theology movement, William R. Jones' 1973 book questions God's whiteness. *Is God A White Racist?* explores the relationship between religion and race from a theological perspective, and this idea has also been revisited in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement with scholars Stephen C. Finley and Biko Mandela Gray (Jones 1998; 2015). The two claim that God is represented by the state, and therefore a white racist (Finley and Gray 2015, 451). Furthermore, and without any reference to his color, Coates, claims that he did not have God on his side (Coates 2017, 28, 113). These examples show a specific continued influence both Baldwin and the issue of religion have had in black discourses and literature in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Although it was a deliberate choice to limit the scope of the thesis to religion, I still think that the issue of sexuality in *Mountain* could have been an interesting part of the discussion on Baldwin's attitude to the church. John's love for Elisha is arguably what helps him through his conversion and gives him peace. However, scholars have comprehensively explored this theme in their works, often favoring the two men's romantic relationship over the complexity of the religious experience. The additional oppression gay people experienced in the 1930s might also have made them gravitate towards the church, but this same factor is perhaps the reason why they are excluded from religious communities. Moreover, this motivation might be true for women too. There are arguably gender expectations and norms within the Christian church, especially at the time when the novel and the play were written;

hence, a broader discussion could have included a look at the female characters' unique experience with religion in the two texts. Margaret, in particular, is a poor single mother who settles in the role as a preacher after leaving her husband. When prioritizing the church, traditional gender and parental roles become increasingly hard to maintain, and this results in Margaret losing her sense of humanity. The role of black women and gay people presents a more realistic image of the actuality of African American church experiences, and a broader study on the two works of fiction could benefit from assessing these issues together.

While this thesis explores the issue of religiosity in three selected works, Baldwin arguably deals with his religious upbringing in his entire career. The 1979 novel *Just Above my Head*, for example, could be another interesting novelistic testament to his views on religion at the end of his career (Baldwin 1994). Specifically, such an analysis could demonstrate the complicated relationship the teen-preacher Julia has with the church as she, similarly to John, David and Baldwin, stops preaching. Also, the 1964 play *Blues for Mister Charlie* and the 1974 novel *If Beal Street Could Talk* deal with the passive role of the church and the criminalization of black men by violent white Christians (Baldwin 1995, 2006). Together these works could provide an increasingly comprehensive idea of the transformation of Baldwin's exploration and personal experience with religion.

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