

Hearing author James Baldwin's prophetic voice



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

PBS describes the documentary "I Am Not Your Negro" in these words: "[James] Baldwin and [Raoul] Peck have produced a work that challenges the very definition of what America stands for."

The promo continues: "The film draws upon Baldwin's notes on the lives and assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. to explore and bring a fresh and radical perspective to the current racial narrative in America."

After viewing this evocative film, I bought a copy of Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" at the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham, Alabama. This 1962 work by the essayist, novelist, playwright and poet serves not only as an incisive exposure of America's race problem but also for the revelations of our religion problem. As no theologian I've read, Baldwin links these two in a deeply personal way.

He perceptively challenges the definition of what religion stands for.

From the very first page, Baldwin describes the "prolonged religious crisis" of his youth. His father was a preacher, so the younger Baldwin learned early on to assume God lived primarily in his father's church.

As he watched his friends drifting into destructive behaviors, James lived in fear of following their descent. Some of the girls he knew warned him to save his soul. He saw people fleeing Harlem to war, wine or whiskey while "others,

like me, fled into the church."

The young man began to see that the only way to be lifted out of the dangers on every corner was to find a "gimmick," and for him the church became his gimmick (gimmick: a magic trick or device to attract attention). Eventually he became a youth minister who drew more attention than his father.

After three years as a preacher, James felt "a slow crumbling of my faith." He was reading books other than the Bible while attending a predominantly Jewish school. Internally, he was in a constant "state of repentance."

Some point out that James Baldwin, as a gay black man, faced the personal and professional judgments of an often ignorant public (see "The Imperfect Power of 'I Am Not Your Negro,'" *The Atlantic*, Feb. 8, 2017). It's no wonder these experiences of inner turmoil were stirred by the restrictive culture and church.

When his father would not accept James' Jewish friend, the son responded, "He's a better Christian than you are." James writes that the pulpit served as a kind of theater and he knew "how the illusion was worked." He knew that if he continued in the pulpit "I would soon have no respect for myself."

In the midst of this crisis, James felt he could see through it all — his church, his faith, himself. He asked himself wrenching questions: "Was Heaven, then, to be merely another ghetto?" It occurred to him that notions of another world were a wishful, distorted reflection of this world.

He would stand in front of the church with troubling thoughts. "When I faced the congregation, it began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away

their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike."

To balance the "gimmick" that his religious faith became for him, Baldwin continued to respect "a zest and a joy" evident in the church. He reflects that "perhaps we were, all of us — pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children — bound together by the nature of our oppression."

Though he seemed to miss elements of the church — gospel music, for one — he felt a certain freedom after he left; he and his friends no longer felt a need "to pretend to be what we were not."

A compelling honesty.

"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."

There is much more truthful insight shining through "The Fire Next Time." Baldwin cuts through the pretenses and

prejudices that divide us. He dares us to be human, to struggle forward to build a livable community.

It is striking to encounter a man who knew Medgar, Malcolm and Martin exclaim: "The value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion." He knows that breaking free of this delusion may seem impossible. But his faith in humankind is fearless. Black American history, he writes, "testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible."

Together we can hold back the fires. As Baldwin says, "Everything now is in our hands."

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