

**Race as Spiritual Crisis: Religion, Inherited Trauma and the
Myth of American Innocence in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the
Mountain* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone***

Ms Megha Chaudhary

PhD Scholar (English)

School of Humanities & Mass Communication

IIMT University

Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

chmeghapanwar2305@gmail.com

Dr. Prakash Bhadury

Professor of English

IIMT University

Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

prakashbhadury@gmail.com

Abstract

James Baldwin's fiction consistently interrogates the relationship between race, religion and identity in American society. While Baldwin is frequently examined as a writer of racial protest and social criticism, his novels also reveal a deeper concern with the spiritual and psychological consequences of racial oppression. This paper examines *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) to argue that Baldwin represents race not merely as a social or political condition but as a profound spiritual crisis embedded within American consciousness. Through the interconnected experiences of family, religion, memory

and racial identity, Baldwin exposes the ways in which inherited trauma shapes both individual subjectivity and collective history. The paper analyses the role of the Black church as a space that simultaneously offers protection and imposes restrictions, while also examining the persistence of generational conflict and the myth of American innocence. By exploring the tensions between faith, identity and racial experience, the study demonstrates how Baldwin challenges dominant narratives of national morality and progress. Ultimately, the novels reveal that racial injustice is sustained not only by institutional structures but also by moral and spiritual failures deeply rooted in American culture.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Race, Religion, Black Church, Spiritual Crisis, American Innocence, Trauma, Racial Identity

Introduction

James Baldwin occupies a unique position in twentieth-century American literature. Novelist, essayist, social critic and public intellectual, Baldwin devoted much of his writing to examining the realities of race, identity and belonging within the United States. His works emerged during a period marked by segregation, racial violence and the growing struggle for civil rights, yet Baldwin's literary vision extends beyond the immediate political circumstances of his time. Rather than treating race solely as a matter of legal discrimination or social inequality, he consistently explores its psychological, moral and spiritual dimensions. His fiction reveals the ways in which racial oppression shapes individual consciousness, family relationships and collective understandings of history.

Throughout his career, Baldwin remained deeply concerned with the relationship between race and religion. Raised within the traditions of the Pentecostal church in Harlem, he possessed first-hand knowledge of the powerful role religion played within African American communities. This experience profoundly influenced his literary imagination. While Baldwin frequently criticised organised religion for its hypocrisy and authoritarianism, he also

recognised its importance as a source of community, resilience and cultural survival. Consequently, religion occupies a complex position within his fiction, functioning simultaneously as a space of refuge and a mechanism of control.

This tension is particularly evident in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Baldwin's semi-autobiographical first novel. Set in Harlem during the 1930s, the novel follows the spiritual journey of John Grimes, a young African American boy struggling to understand himself within the restrictive environment created by his family, church and community. The narrative explores questions of faith, guilt, identity and belonging while simultaneously addressing the broader realities of racial inequality. Through John's experiences, Baldwin demonstrates how religious institutions shape individual consciousness and influence the formation of racial identity.

A related concern appears in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), a novel that examines the life of Leo Proudhammer, a successful Black actor reflecting upon his personal and professional experiences. Unlike the adolescent John Grimes, Leo confronts issues of race, sexuality, memory and public identity from the perspective of adulthood. The novel investigates the performance of identity within American society and reveals the continuing impact of racial history upon individual self-understanding. Through Leo's reflections, Baldwin explores the emotional and psychological burdens imposed by racism, exposing the complex relationship between personal freedom and social expectation.

Although these novels differ in narrative structure and historical context, they share a common concern with the formation of Black subjectivity. Baldwin repeatedly demonstrates that racial identity cannot be understood in isolation from family history, religious experience and national mythology. The characters in both novels inherit emotional and psychological burdens that originate in earlier generations, revealing how racial trauma extends across time. Family relationships become sites where social inequalities are reproduced, contested and

internalised. Consequently, the struggle for self-definition is inseparable from the struggle to confront inherited histories of suffering and exclusion.

Another significant dimension of Baldwin's work is his critique of what he frequently described as the myth of American innocence. Baldwin argued that American society often refuses to acknowledge the historical realities of slavery, racial violence and systemic injustice. This refusal creates a false sense of moral innocence that prevents meaningful confrontation with the nation's past. His fiction repeatedly challenges this mythology by exposing the human consequences of racial oppression and by insisting upon the necessity of historical reckoning. The spiritual crisis represented in his novels therefore extends beyond individual characters and becomes a reflection of the nation's unresolved moral contradictions.

This paper argues that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* portray race not merely as a form of social oppression but as a spiritual crisis embedded within American consciousness. Through their representations of religion, inherited trauma, family conflict and national identity, the novels reveal the profound moral consequences of racial injustice. By examining the Black church as both shelter and prison, and by analysing Baldwin's critique of American innocence, the study demonstrates how his fiction transforms racial experience into a broader interrogation of faith, history and human responsibility.

Race and Spiritual Crisis in Baldwin's Vision

James Baldwin's literary treatment of race extends far beyond the conventional framework of social discrimination and political inequality. While his novels undeniably confront the realities of racism in American society, Baldwin repeatedly emphasises the psychological, moral and spiritual consequences of racial oppression. For Baldwin, race is not merely a political problem but a crisis that shapes consciousness itself. The experiences of his characters reveal how racism distorts human relationships, damages self-perception and

produces profound forms of emotional and spiritual suffering. In both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, racial identity emerges through complex interactions between history, religion, family and personal memory. The struggle against racism therefore becomes inseparable from the struggle for self-understanding and moral freedom.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin situates racial consciousness within the social environment of Harlem. The novel presents Harlem not merely as a geographical location but as a historical and cultural space shaped by segregation, poverty and racial exclusion. The experiences of the Grimes family reflect the broader realities confronting African Americans in early twentieth-century America. Although the narrative focuses on spiritual conflict and family relationships, racial inequality remains a constant presence in the background of everyday life. John's search for identity occurs within a society that continuously imposes limitations upon Black existence. Consequently, his spiritual struggle cannot be separated from the racial realities surrounding him.

Baldwin's depiction of John Grimes demonstrates how racial identity becomes internalised at an early age. John is highly conscious of his social position and frequently experiences feelings of alienation and insecurity. He possesses intellectual ambitions and imaginative aspirations, yet he also recognises the restrictions imposed by race and class. Critics have observed that Baldwin's portrayal of John reflects the psychological burden of growing up Black within a racially stratified society (Harris, 1985). John's desire for self-definition is therefore complicated by external social pressures as well as internal conflicts concerning faith, guilt and belonging.

The relationship between race and spirituality becomes particularly significant through Baldwin's representation of religious experience. John's spiritual awakening is often interpreted as a moment of religious transformation, yet it also reflects a deeper search for identity and

acceptance. The church provides a language through which suffering, hope and redemption can be understood. At the same time, religious discourse frequently reinforces feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Baldwin thus presents spiritual experience as both liberating and restrictive. John's struggle is not simply a religious struggle but a confrontation with the inherited structures that shape his understanding of himself and his place within the world.

A similar concern with racial subjectivity appears in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. The novel centres upon Leo Proudhammer, a successful Black actor whose reflections upon his life reveal the continuing influence of racial history upon personal identity. Unlike John Grimes, Leo has achieved a degree of social mobility and public recognition. Nevertheless, racial consciousness remains central to his experience. His success does not free him from the psychological effects of racism; rather, it exposes new tensions regarding visibility, performance and belonging.

Leo's career as an actor is particularly important because it highlights the performative dimensions of racial identity. Throughout the novel, Baldwin explores the extent to which Black individuals are required to negotiate social expectations imposed by a racially structured society. Leo frequently confronts situations in which he must perform versions of himself for different audiences. This experience reflects what Baldwin repeatedly identifies as the difficulty of achieving authentic selfhood within a culture shaped by racial stereotypes and exclusion. The performance of identity becomes a strategy of survival, yet it also produces emotional strain and psychological fragmentation.

Baldwin's essays provide important insight into this aspect of his fiction. In *The Fire Next Time*, he argues that the American racial order damages both the oppressed and the oppressor by sustaining illusions that prevent genuine human understanding. Baldwin insists that racial divisions are maintained not only through political systems but also through moral failures embedded within national consciousness. This perspective informs both novels. The

characters' struggles are never purely personal because they emerge from larger historical structures that shape their perceptions of themselves and others.

The idea that race constitutes a spiritual crisis is further connected to Baldwin's critique of innocence. According to Lawrie Balfour (2001), Baldwin repeatedly challenges the tendency of American society to avoid confronting the realities of racial history. The refusal to acknowledge historical injustice creates a false sense of innocence that perpetuates social inequality and moral blindness. In both novels, characters inherit emotional and psychological burdens created by earlier generations. Family histories reveal patterns of suffering, silence and unresolved conflict that continue to influence the present. Racial trauma therefore appears not as an isolated event but as an ongoing historical condition transmitted across generations.

The significance of inherited trauma is especially visible through the figures of Gabriel Grimes and Leo Proudhammer. Although these characters inhabit different historical contexts, both struggle with the weight of personal and collective histories. Their experiences illustrate Baldwin's conviction that identity is shaped by forces extending beyond individual choice. Family memory, social exclusion and historical violence all contribute to the formation of subjectivity. The past remains active within the present, influencing behaviour, relationships and self-perception.

Ultimately, Baldwin's fiction rejects simplistic understandings of race as a purely social category. In both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, racial identity is represented as a complex and deeply internalised experience shaped by religion, history and collective memory. The spiritual crises confronting John Grimes and Leo Proudhammer reflect broader moral contradictions within American society itself. Through their struggles, Baldwin reveals that the problem of race cannot be resolved solely through legal reform or political change. It also requires a profound confrontation with history, identity and the ethical foundations of national life.

The Black Church: Shelter and Prison

Religion occupies a central place in James Baldwin's literary imagination, and no institution appears more frequently in his work than the Black church. Baldwin's relationship with Christianity was deeply complex. As a young man, he served as a Pentecostal preacher in Harlem before eventually distancing himself from organised religion. Yet his departure from the church did not diminish its significance within his writing. Instead, Baldwin continued to engage critically with religion throughout his career, recognising both its capacity to sustain Black communities and its tendency to reinforce fear, guilt and authoritarianism. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, the Black church functions simultaneously as a place of refuge and a site of constraint. It provides emotional support and collective identity while also imposing rigid moral expectations that restrict individual freedom.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the church serves as the primary social and spiritual centre of the community. For African Americans living under conditions of racial discrimination and economic hardship, religious institutions offer a sense of belonging and collective strength. The church becomes a space where suffering can be expressed, dignity affirmed and hope sustained. Baldwin acknowledges the historical importance of religion within Black life, particularly in a society that systematically denied African Americans access to power and recognition. The congregation's worship services provide moments of emotional release and spiritual affirmation that counteract the dehumanising effects of racism.

At the same time, Baldwin refuses to idealise the church. Through the character of Gabriel Grimes, he exposes the ways in which religious authority can become oppressive. Gabriel presents himself as a devout and righteous man, yet his behaviour is frequently marked by hypocrisy, anger and intolerance. He exercises strict control over his family and interprets religious doctrine in ways that justify his authority. Rather than nurturing spiritual growth, his

version of faith often produces fear and emotional repression. Baldwin's portrayal of Gabriel reveals the dangers of a religious culture that prioritises obedience over compassion and moral self-reflection.

The tension between spiritual comfort and spiritual control is particularly evident in John Grimes's experience. John is attracted to the church because it offers a framework through which he can understand suffering, purpose and identity. However, he is also troubled by the fear, guilt and judgment that dominate much of its discourse. His religious conversion is therefore marked by ambiguity. While it provides a sense of transcendence and belonging, it does not resolve the deeper conflicts surrounding his identity and relationships. Critics such as Trudier Harris have noted that Baldwin frequently portrays religious experience as a complex negotiation between liberation and restriction, rather than as a straightforward path to redemption. John's spiritual journey exemplifies this duality.

The church also shapes racial consciousness within the novel. Religious language provides a means through which Black communities interpret their collective suffering and historical experiences. Biblical narratives of exile, bondage and deliverance resonate strongly with African American history, creating connections between spiritual and racial identity. Baldwin recognises the empowering potential of these traditions. Yet he simultaneously questions whether religious institutions always encourage critical engagement with social realities. The promise of heavenly salvation can sometimes divert attention from the urgent need for justice in the present world. This tension becomes one of the central concerns of Baldwin's religious critique.

A related dynamic appears in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, although religion occupies a less visible position in the narrative. Leo Proudhammer does not experience the church in the same immediate way as John Grimes, yet the moral and emotional structures associated with religious culture continue to influence his understanding of himself and others.

The novel explores how inherited religious values shape attitudes towards race, sexuality and personal identity. Leo's reflections reveal the lasting impact of religious teachings even after formal participation in church life has diminished.

The question of freedom occupies a crucial place in both novels. Baldwin repeatedly asks whether religious institutions genuinely promote liberation or whether they merely replace one form of constraint with another. For many African Americans, the church historically provided protection against the hostility of the wider society. It offered educational opportunities, political organisation and emotional support. Scholars such as Eddie S. Glaude Jr. have emphasised the importance of Black religious traditions in sustaining communal resilience under conditions of racial oppression. Baldwin acknowledges these contributions while remaining attentive to the limitations of institutional religion.

This ambivalence distinguishes Baldwin from both religious apologists and secular critics. He neither wholly rejects nor wholly embraces Christianity. Instead, he investigates the contradictions that emerge when religious ideals encounter human imperfection. The church becomes a microcosm of broader social structures, reproducing many of the hierarchies and conflicts present within the larger society. Issues of authority, gender, power and exclusion appear within religious communities just as they do outside them. Consequently, spiritual life cannot be isolated from social reality.

The figure of Gabriel Grimes illustrates this point with particular force. Gabriel's authority derives not only from his position within the family but also from his status as a religious leader. His moral rigidity reflects a desire for certainty in a world characterised by racial insecurity and social vulnerability. Yet his attempts to impose absolute control ultimately generate suffering rather than redemption. Baldwin suggests that genuine spirituality requires humility, self-examination and compassion rather than domination. The failure of characters such as Gabriel arises from their inability to recognise their own limitations and contradictions.

Baldwin's critique of religion ultimately extends beyond the church itself. The deeper issue concerns the human tendency to seek certainty through rigid systems of belief. Whether those systems are religious, racial or political, they become dangerous when they suppress complexity and deny the humanity of others. The Black church therefore functions as both shelter and prison because it embodies this dual potential. It can nurture resilience and collective identity, but it can also reinforce fear, conformity and exclusion. Through his nuanced portrayal of religious life, Baldwin demonstrates that spiritual freedom requires more than institutional faith; it demands an honest confrontation with history, suffering and the realities of human experience.

Thus, in both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, religion emerges as a central force in the construction of Black subjectivity. The church offers protection against the wounds inflicted by racism, yet it also imposes constraints that complicate the search for selfhood. Baldwin's enduring achievement lies in his ability to reveal these contradictions without reducing them to simple oppositions. His fiction presents religion as a deeply human institution—capable of inspiring hope, sustaining community and simultaneously limiting personal freedom.

Inherited Trauma, Masculinity and the Myth of American Innocence

Baldwin repeatedly demonstrates that racial identity is shaped not only by immediate social experiences but also by inherited histories of suffering and exclusion. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, family memory functions as a repository of unresolved trauma. The narratives of Gabriel, Elizabeth and Florence reveal how personal lives are shaped by broader histories of racial oppression and economic hardship. Rather than presenting trauma as a single event, Baldwin portrays it as a continuing historical condition transmitted across generations. As Trudier Harris argues, Baldwin's fiction consistently links individual suffering to collective

racial memory, making family history a crucial site for understanding Black identity (Harris, 1985).

The figure of Gabriel Grimes exemplifies this process. Gabriel attempts to exercise authority through religion and patriarchy, yet his rigid moralism conceals profound insecurity and unresolved guilt. His relationship with John is shaped less by paternal affection than by a desire for control. Baldwin suggests that Gabriel's behaviour reflects the psychological consequences of living within a racially oppressive society. The violence he directs toward others emerges partly from wounds he has never confronted within himself. Consequently, the family becomes a space where historical trauma is reproduced rather than healed.

The transmission of trauma is equally significant in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. Leo Proudhammer's reflections reveal the enduring impact of racial exclusion on personal identity. Although Leo achieves professional success, he remains conscious of the expectations and stereotypes imposed upon Black men within American society. His experiences demonstrate that social mobility does not eliminate the psychological effects of racism. As Dwight A. McBride observes, Baldwin's protagonists often struggle to construct authentic identities within cultural environments that continuously define them through race (McBride, 1999).

Questions of masculinity occupy a central place in this struggle. Baldwin challenges traditional assumptions that equate manhood with authority, emotional restraint and dominance. Gabriel embodies one version of patriarchal masculinity, while Leo represents a more self-reflective and conflicted model. Neither figure achieves complete freedom from the pressures imposed by racialised expectations. Instead, Baldwin reveals masculinity as a performance shaped by historical circumstances and social demands. In this respect, his work anticipates later discussions of race and gender that emphasise the constructed nature of identity (Ferguson, 2004).

The issue of masculinity ultimately connects to Baldwin's critique of American innocence. Throughout his essays and fiction, Baldwin argues that the United States has consistently refused to confront the moral implications of its racial history. In *The Fire Next Time*, he contends that Americans frequently preserve a sense of innocence by denying the realities of slavery, segregation and racial violence (Baldwin, 1963). This denial allows historical injustices to persist beneath narratives of national progress and democratic achievement.

Such innocence is repeatedly challenged in Baldwin's novels. The suffering experienced by John Grimes and Leo Proudhammer is not presented as accidental or isolated. Rather, it emerges from social structures rooted in historical inequality. As Lawrie Balfour notes, Baldwin exposes the gap between America's democratic ideals and its racial realities, insisting that genuine reconciliation requires historical accountability (Balfour, 2001). The spiritual crises experienced by Baldwin's characters therefore reflect a broader national failure to acknowledge the past.

Ultimately, Baldwin's fiction suggests that racial justice requires more than legal reform or political change. It demands a confrontation with inherited histories, moral responsibility and collective memory. Through his representations of family conflict, masculinity and national mythology, Baldwin reveals that race operates not merely as a social category but as a profound spiritual crisis embedded within American consciousness.

Conclusion

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* demonstrate that race is not merely a social or political condition but a profound spiritual crisis embedded within American consciousness. Through his exploration of religion, family history, masculinity and national identity, Baldwin reveals how racial oppression shapes individual subjectivity and collective experience. His characters struggle not only against

external discrimination but also against inherited burdens of guilt, fear and historical trauma that continue to influence their understanding of themselves and others.

The study has shown that the Black church occupies an ambivalent position in Baldwin's fiction. It serves as a source of cultural solidarity, spiritual comfort and communal resilience, while simultaneously functioning as a space of discipline, authority and emotional repression. Through the experiences of John Grimes, Gabriel Grimes and Leo Proudhammer, Baldwin exposes the tensions between freedom and control, faith and fear, selfhood and conformity.

The novels also highlight the enduring impact of generational trauma and the pressures associated with racialised constructions of masculinity. Family relationships become sites where historical wounds are transmitted across generations, shaping personal identities and social relationships. At the same time, Baldwin challenges dominant narratives of American innocence by exposing the nation's refusal to confront the realities of slavery, segregation and racial injustice. For Baldwin, this denial constitutes a moral failure that sustains racial inequality and prevents genuine reconciliation. Ultimately, Baldwin's fiction insists that racial justice requires more than political reform. It demands an honest engagement with history, memory and ethical responsibility. By presenting race as a spiritual crisis as well as a social reality, Baldwin offers a powerful critique of American society and a compelling vision of human recognition, accountability

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2026 by Ms Megha Chaudhary, Dr. Prakash Bhadury Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial

purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

References

- Baldwin, J. (1953). *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Baldwin, J. (1963). *The Fire Next Time*. Dial Press.
- Baldwin, J. (1968). *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. Dial Press.
- Balfour, L. (2001). *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy*. Cornell University Press.
- Ferguson, R. A. (2004). *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Field, D. (2015). *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin*. Oxford University Press.
- Harris, T. (1985). *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. University of Tennessee Press.
- McBride, D. A. (Ed.). (1999). *James Baldwin Now*. New York University Press. and transformation.