



**AFRICAN AMERICANS' RESPONSIBILITY IN THE USA DEFERRED
DREAM OF FULL INTEGRATION A CENTURY AFTER
EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION: A DISCURSIVE REVISITATION
OF JAMES BALDWIN'S *THE FIRE NEXT TIME* (1963)**

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Abstract

When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, it was obvious that the former slaves' fate was at stake. But it was not possible to anticipate on any complicity between stakeholders who fought for Blacks people's emancipation and those others who shed their blood opposing their enfranchisement, hindering the promises of the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in America. A century later, justice and equality for Blacks were still an unattainable dream. Many black authors and artists have depicted the white man's biased attitude against the newly freed black. Yet, other black authors like Zora Neale Hurston, through her novel: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and James Baldwin with his essay: *The Fire Next Time*, have adopted a more mediate and responsible stance. For them, even if it is true that the white man's attitude toward the emancipated blacks is suicidal, the Blacks' daily attitudes towards the whites in the one hand, and towards their fellows African Americans in the other hand, has rather contributed in worsening the cohabitation and social interplay of the two social communities: the former master and the former slave, now full American citizen. James Baldwin's *The Fire Next time*, written on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of emancipation, with the aim of taking the stock of Blacks' situation in America since emancipation ratification, operates in the same vein.

Key-words: Incomplete Emancipation - whites' attitudes - cohabitation - anniversary of emancipation - warning

Résumé

Lorsque la Guerre de Sécession éclata aux Etats-Unis en 1861, l'avenir des Noirs esclaves d'alors était vu comme l'enjeu. Mais nulle ne pouvait anticiper sur cette complicité post-conflit et post émancipation, entre les supposés anti esclavagistes du Nord qui ont lutté pour la libération des Noirs et leurs frères esclavagistes blancs du Sud qui ont versé leur sang pour faire perpétuer la traite négrière et l'esclavage en Amérique. En effet, un siècle après l'abolition de l'esclavage, les Noirs américains sont toujours en quête de justice et d'égalité. Plusieurs écrivains et artistes noirs américains sévèrement décrié de l'attitude injuste des Blancs américains qui se refusent toujours d'admettre leurs ex-esclaves désormais leurs compatriotes, avec les mêmes droits. Mais d'autres auteurs tels que Zora Neale Hurston, à travers son Roman *Their Eyes*

Were Watching God (1937), et James Baldwin dans son essai intitulé *The Fire Next Time*, ont plutôt adopté une position médiane. Pour ces derniers s'il est vrai que l'attitude des Blancs américains envers leurs frères Noirs est suicidaire, il est tout aussi évident que les Noirs, à travers leurs attitudes quotidiennes, faites de mépris, rejet et haine envers les Blancs d'une part et envers leurs compatriotes Noirs même d'autre part, ont contribué à rendre la cohabitation et la collaboration avec les Blancs difficiles. *The Fire Next time* de James Baldwin principalement, écrit à l'occasion du centenaire de l'émancipation des Noirs américains, évoque une responsabilité commune des Blancs et des Noirs américains dans l'échec de l'intégration des Noirs, et la nécessité pour les Blancs et les Noirs de s'accepter en vue d'une Amérique réellement intégrée.

Mots-clés: Emancipation inachevée - centenaire - nécessité de cohabitation - avertissement

Introduction

The idea of "race" is a social construct paradoxically meant to portray a natural classification of the mankind, reflects biological differences among groups of people that originate from different parts of the world. Since racial ancestry classifications are generally hooked to observable physical differences between people, the apparent naturalness of race seems obvious to most people. The African Americans make up one of those social communities of the American society distinguished by those racial standards of classification. Although it would be inaccurate to talk about the history of America without mentioning the participation of the Blacks in the country's development from its inception, the first British colonial settlements to the Emergence of the country as today's Super power, it has been hard to mention the United States of America a homogenous nation, since a century after their emancipation, the ex-slaves were still struggling to have a fair share in the American common welfare. Although the responsibility of African Americans in the worsening of their conditions in the post-emancipation era is to be attributed to the Whites and ex-masters, one might also contend that overall, emancipated Blacks did little to change this situation. This is an interpretation which ensues from the reading of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* which makes up the substance of this paper.

1. Context, objective and method

1.1. Contextualizing the essay :*The Fire Next Time*, by James Baldwin

The Fire Next Time was published in 1963, exactly a hundred years after emancipation proclamation in America. Baldwin then intended to make a point of the real meaning of emancipation from the offer or, the white American, and the beneficiary, the ex-slave. As for Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching*

God that was rejected by the Harlem Renaissance leaders because of its presenting the negative side of the Blacks, *The Fire Next Time* has dared address both Blacks and Whites as co-actors and equally responsible for the non-homogeneity of the American society. Indeed, the racial issue in the middle twentieth century was so hard that, as a black novelist or writer, to dare portray any negative side of fellow blacks would be seen as an offence to the whole African American community.

Emancipation had meant a lot for African Americans; it came to them with hopes and promises. But with legislation like the Jim Crow Law that prevailed from 1890 to 1910, African Americans were almost returned into a new form of slavery. The Black codes and Ku Klux Klans' activism had led to the decline of Blacks' hope and the promise of Abraham Lincoln's emancipation gift was then jeopardized. Baptist preacher Thomas Dixon wrote *The Leopard's Spot: a Romance of the white Man's Burden* (1902), asserting White supremacy amidst the supposed African American evil and corruption. The book was so popular that Dixon added a trilogy. His second novel, *The Clansmen*, adapted for the film *The Silent Birth of a Nation*, portraying the African American as an unintelligent, sexually aggressive person. To counterpart that negative view on the black man, writers starting from the Harlem Renaissance, were urged to consider improving the image of the Blacks in America.

James Baldwin's essay, structured in two letters addressed to his fellow blacks, was a kind of appeal for self-consciousness, instead of attributing their current situation to a mere racial conflict with the Whites. Baldwin then agreed with Zora Neale Hurston, when the latter said: "Many Negroes have criticized my novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, because I did not make it a lecture on the race problem"; Hurston, though not rejecting this remark, explained her choice as follows:

... I was writing a novel and not a treatise on sociology..... I have ceased to think in term of race; I think only in terms of individuals. I am interested in you now, not as a Negro man, but as a man. I am not interested in the race problem, but I am interested in the problems of individuals, the white ones and the black ones¹

1.2. Objectives, methodology and literary theory

The present paper aims at revealing the responsibility of the Blacks in the unkept promise of emancipation, and their incomplete integration in America. Without denying the Whites bad attitudes, this paper analyzes and interprets the bad attitudes and harmful practices of some Black Americans towards their fellow

¹ Article 'The Hierarchy itself : Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the Sacrifice of Narrative Authority', by Ryan Simmons

Blacks in the one hand, and towards the Whites in the other hand, which contributes for nothing but increases the gap between the two races. The final warning of Baldwin is the to be taken seriously: Whites and Blacks had better accept and love one another, otherwise both races will go through self-destruction.

The methodology used here is mainly based on documentary research; data have priority been collected from the plot as presented and developed by James Baldwin through the essay, and the analysis and comment have been made on the basis of the African American post emancipation history. Indeed, *The Fire Next Time* is not a fictional work; it is the revelation of Black Americans' negative side of life, in a period they were in search of security and improvement of living conditions, a period when they were denouncing the white man's atrocious legal and non-legal measures against them. The literary theory applied is the New Historicism, a form of [postmodernism](#) applied to interpretive history, a literary theory whose goal is to understand intellectual history through literature, and literature through its cultural context. New Historicism appears as appropriate to the present paper since Baldwin's work is an essay based on history (civilization), and there is hardly a gap between literature and civilization.

2. Baldwin's View on American Racism, a Century after Emancipation

Through "*My Dungeon Shook, Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation*", the first of the two letters that make the essay: *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin mainly discusses two issues; he presents the white man as an innocent-guilty player in his conflictual and racial relation with the black man, then he depicts the black's conceit, which has prevented him from emerging out of domination, to enjoy full equality.

2.1. The Innocent Guilty White Man

Baldwin, in his address to his young nephew, refers to white people as "innocent and well-meaning people" (page 6). This could be understood on four main grounds.

The white man of the moment was not the direct person to be blamed for everything that happened to the Blacks in the New World. The white man is just an heir; he has inherited from his ancestors. The White American of today has grown within a system where the Blacks had no rights; a system in which he was taught that the white race is superior, and that there should exist no equality with any other human of a different origin, let alone the Blacks. There was then no sin for the perpetuation of slavery, even though it was said that the Blacks were

emancipated. How could the ex-servant pretend to equal the ex-master? And the neat hands of the whites were not made for those kind of job accomplished by the Blacks in the plantations and in the households. How could things change so suddenly? There lies the innocence in the behavior of the post-emancipation Whiteman.

Since the very scourge of the black man came from the practice of slavery, it is important to analyze the problem from the roots. Should the white man be blamed for the whole institution of slavery? The white man, for sure, was not the inventor or the practice of slavery. Slavery had existed in the African kingdoms before it was transported to the American colonies to replace the indentured servants, due to the benefit it represented for the colonists. The African kings made war captives during their inter-tribal crusades. The American slaves were not kept in chains in permanence, unless proved dangerous for the master, contrarily to the African slaves. African kings made of other people slaves out of pride², while American colonists acquired slaves out of need. During slavery, the black man was a valuable property and part of the white man's family, while in Africa, although some slaves lived in the household, they were hardly close to their masters the way American slaves were. In America, the slaves had a circumscribed freedom and could cook their own food, while in Africa, the case was different. It appears clearly then that the white man, at least the one of the post-emancipation period, is an innocent player in the slavery system. But if the white man of the nineteenth century can be free from responsibility in the enslavement of the Blacks, what reading could be made a hundred years after the emancipation proclamation?

2.2. The Reverse of the Medal

When the thirteen American colonies declared war on the British for obtaining independence, it was on the premise that "everybody on earth possesses the right of self-governance" and then to reinforce the independence and union, the new states made it clear in the preamble to the Constitution that "all men are created equal;" that "they are endowed by the creator with a certain unalienable rights". The slavery issue then seems to run in the same vein as the domination of Great Britain over America. And it ignited the memorable fights for freedom which were later materialized into clauses of civil rights appended to the colonies' constitutions. Among these provisions, are the rights for every human to life, to liberty and to the pursuit of happiness on which the Declaration of independence is premised. But if it can be admitted that the slaves be denied these rights, since

²Addison, C. Jr. (1971). *Bondage, freedom and beyond: the prose of black Americans*. Zenith Books, Double-day and Company, Inc., Garden City, New

slavery obliterates black people's rights to life and liberty, what then to say about the white man's attitude after the abolition of slavery?

The deprivation of the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right the enjoyment of happiness to Blacks, the ex-slave, was programmed to be changed by Abraham Lincoln by his proclamation and the ratification of the blacks' emancipation in 1865, which is destined to free the enslaved blacks from their unjust bondage. (reference) But the Blacks were rather rescued from a permanent hell to a slow motion hell. There was actually no pragmatism in the proclamation of freedom to the Blacks; their situation got out of boundaries and became more critical. The post-emancipation America had black people go through hard times by depriving them of the fruits of their freedom, by segregation and many other forms of injustice. To put it more clearly, the condition of the blacks now turned from exploitation to persecution.

It is that experience of the African Americans that James Arthur Baldwin tries to reveal; he demonstrates the inadequacy of the emancipation proclamation after 100 years in his famous essay "*The Fire Next Time*". In that first part of the book entitled: "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," Baldwin diagnoses America's racism and makes his prescription for his young nephew's survival in such a diseased society. As a man who has seen America at its worst, Baldwin warns his nephew of the dangers threatening a young black man. He insinuates that the black's emancipation was founded on pure lies. If it the white American of the 1960s is to free from responsibility in the presence and condition of the blacks in America, those white men cannot be free from the responsibility for the atrocious condition into which they forced the Blacks after emancipation. Why then free the slaves and then immediately control the whole of his life under some "black codes"? Why should there exist, in the same nation, a Constitution governing a group of people (the whites), and some codes aiming at preventing others (the blacks) from enjoying the liberty they are said to have gained? The paradoxical attitude of the white men is also when they freed the blacks, just to let them at the Ku Klux Klan's mercy; when they set the Blacks in segregated neighborhoods for them to perish. "*This innocent country set you in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish*" (page 7). And Baldwin makes his point clearer: the Blacks were born there and were going through those difficult situations just because they were **Blacks and Free**. A black man should then not be free. And this can be learnt from the whole process from the institution of slavery to the post-emancipation. As slaves, Blacks were better treated by the Whites than they were when they became free; during slavery, the black man as a property and had a great value for his master. Most of them fed for survival and labor, and had a shack to sleep in. When the Black was sick, he was cured. He lived in the compound of his master and was

encouraged to start a family and to reproduce. But on the contrary, when the same black man became free, he no more had any value; worse, he became a threat to the white man. The latter became reluctant to have him in the surrounding. And any search of prosperity hardened the difficult collaboration with the white man. Baldwin sets this clearly in the following words: "The limits of your ambitions were thus expected to be set forever. You were born in a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence; you were expected to make peace with mediocrity" (page 7). But Baldwin does not choose to merely tell the black man about his past and present conditions. He has mainly aimed at telling him what, from his own daily attitude, has encouraged the white man in that position of domination.

2.3. Fighting Conceitedness

Adapting to new conditions is not always easy, nor acceptable to everyone, and this is how Baldwin explains the resistance of the white man in accepting the Black person's new status. How could it be possible for the white man to accept that his former slaves suddenly become his fellow citizens? How could those white men conceive a society where there would enjoy the same rights with those people they have enslaved and dominated for centuries? The real issue resides there. This can be seen as a fear of possible retaliation from the former slaves, but also as a mark of pride.

Many of them (the whites), indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the mind of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. (Page 9)

The abrupt change here is the idea of having blacks as free and equal human beings, in an environment formally entirely controlled by the whites. But as Baldwin puts it, the main problem with the blacks is not the refusal of the whites to accept their new condition; it is rather the refusal of the Blacks to take control of their new condition. That is their refusal to become their own masters. For centuries, Blacks had received orders and toiled hard under constraint. But as long as they continue kowtowing to and looking up to the white man as a superior being, this attitude will give the white men good reasons for continuing to maintain them in this new form of slavery. In his letter to little James, Baldwin warns the latter (and through him the whole black American community) that the most destructive thing is to believe what people think or say of you, especially

when this is negative. When it is said by the Whites that you Blacks are worthless and you buy into this lie, your soul and spirit will be corrupted with the idea and you will in actual fact be worthless. Baldwin addresses his nephew in these words: *"Please, try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear"* (page 8). Baldwin then reminds the Blacks about the terms 'Acceptance' and 'Integration' respectively from Booker T. Washington and WEB DuBois, which imply forgiveness, love and responsibility, but never submission and conceit. However, to me, the best message of Baldwin to the black community, one hundred years after emancipation, lie in the following: *"Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go"* (page 8). These words might seem to emphasize on the origin; but where you come from, here, has little to do with the (African) origin of the black Americans. The idea here is rather what those Blacks have been able to accomplish until then. In effect, the huge contributions of the Blacks, either as slaves or as citizens, into what the United States looked like a century after emancipation, are undeniable. Their contributions in the plantations, in the households and the overall increase of the whole nation's living conditions are most obvious, and this is what accounts for the rejection of any idea of a true emancipation for them. Calling on Blacks to remember where they come from, is then urging them for a huge contribution to the building of American. It won't then be conceivable that blacks willingly exclude themselves from the enjoyment of the fruits of those efforts of theirs. That is why, integrating the American society is essential for their survival. This contradicts the philosophy of separation advocated by Marcus Garvey, and which claims that blacks did not choose to be in America, and since they were now free, they had better go back home. There is no other place for the black Americans than American; and to live there, they must join hands, weigh their potentials, reject the idea of being inferior and worthless, and make their way through the American society.

3. Black Americans' Religious Considerations: a Handicap to Integration

3.1. Religion as an Alternative to Safety

Although many slaves in America tried to practice their African ancestral religions, the majority of them were forced into their masters' religion, which is Christianity. After emancipation, despite the need to find a typical black identity within the global America, there appeared no need to reject the white man's religion. As a matter of fact the vast majority of emancipated Blacks were born in a kind of Christian faith. But faced with the scourge and the new slavery system to keep them in domination, Blacks, and the youth, in their great majority abandoned

the church for the street. Harlem stood a prototype street life environment, where young Blacks thought to find solutions to their new lives. But very soon, it appeared clearly that the street was far from being the solution to the white man's oppression. Baldwin displays his experience this kind of life in Harlem when he was fourteen.

What I saw around me that summer in Harlem was what I had always seen; My friends were now downtown, busy, as they put it, "fighting the man". They began to care less about the way they looked, the way they dressed, the things they did; presently, one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway, sharing a jug of wine or a bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing, fighting, sometimes weeping; lost, and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was "the man", the white man... But now, without any warning, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the avenue had become a personal menace.... My friends began to drink and smoke, and embarked - at first avid, then groaning - on their sexual careers. Girls, only slightly older than I was, who sang in choir or taught Sunday school, the children of holy parents, underwent, before my eyes, their incredible metamorphosis, of which the most bewildering aspect was not their budding breasts or their rounding behinds but something deeper and more subtle, in their eyes, their heat, their odor, and the inflection of their voices. (Pages 16 to19)

In the street, white policemen would amuse themselves with Blacks by frisking the latter, making comic (and terrifying) speculations concerning Blacks' ancestry and probable sexual powers. The wages of sin were then visible everywhere, in every wine-stained, in every ambulance hooks, in every scare on the black man's face, in every black baby born onto that land, in every knife and pistol fight on the avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin that informs about: a cousin, mother of six, suddenly gone mad, the children parceled out here and there; an indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow, agonizing death in a terrible small room; someone's bright son blown into eternity by his own hand; another turned robber and carried off to jail. In these circumstances, crime was everywhere "not as a possibility, but as the possibility". Since the experience in the street has shown to be more threatening than positive to the Blacks, it became urgent to leave it. With the advent of the Second World War, many Blacks the found refuge in the army, all to be changed there and rarely for the better, many to be ruined, and many to die. Others fled to other states and cities - that is, to other ghettos. Some went on wine or whiskey or the needles (drugs). And the vast majority, including Baldwin, fled into the church in search of protection and salvation.

3.2. Baldwin's Experience and View on Christianity

To be a good black person the immediate post-emancipation period could be equated with to attend church, the only place where Blacks, not only had the only Savior, God, but also where the temptation of falling into criminality was killed. For most Blacks outside the church, killing or robbing the Whites was far from being a crime, since this would only mean getting back what belonged to them. Any black person, with little knowledge on the Holy Bible could make a pastor,

with the overt mission of shepherding the black community to salvation and protection from the Whites. Baldwin then experienced two different Christian lives, first in the church where his own father was a pastor, then he switches to a female pastor's church by a friend of his. But with the two, Baldwin, voicing the whole black American community, made the same remark: the church was another place for racketing people. Black people in their different churches were to mirror the pastor rather than God. The "Whose little boy are you?" that welcomed every new comer would just mean "who are you going to worship?" Such a question could not be put if the expected answer was God. The woman pastor was totally satisfied, and Baldwin was admitted to the church, soon where he replied: "Why, Yours" (page 29).

Black pastors, as Baldwin witnessed it, were full of energy and some of their words seemed really powerful. When they set a hand on your head or forehead and uttered their biblical incantations, you'd faint. Under the woman pastor screaming and invocations, Baldwin lay unconscious for some time before he came back to himself. With such prophetic power, it is right that he wonders why those pastors couldn't make a change, given so much power by God. And "*if His (God) love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the Blacks, cast down so far...?*" (page 31).

The Blacks in those churches had been looking for three main things: Faith, Hope and Charity (page 31). Faith that would drive them close to their God, the only solution to the persecution they were subjected to. Hope, that is the only thing they could still rely on in that American land they had been driving to unwillingly, that they had shed their blood to make a living place, and that it was not conceivable that they should live now; they was nowhere else to call homeland, America was the only land they had ever known, even though they could not deny that they all came from somewhere that still existed, that would not reject them. Even if the separationist attempt by Marcus Garvey helped build a nation (Liberia) in Africa, it is also true that the Back to Africa trip revealed that Africa is not a mere village where everyone could get to their different source families. Africa is a continent with more diverse cultural and ethnical colors; Charity, because the church was supposed to be a place beyond family features, where solidarity, assistance, acceptance and love should reside. But on the opposite, Baldwin found in the Black American churches, the counterparts of those three concepts: the principles of Blindness, Loneliness and Terror. First, when the black pastor said: "love your neighbor", he or she meant something totally different from what Baldwin had anticipated; the neighbor didn't mean the person living next to you, nor a human being like you. Your neighbor in the view of the pastor was the one with the same skin color with you; and sometimes your

neighbor is not every black person, be he /you're your father, your mother or siblings, or any relative of yours. Your neighbor is simply that black person attending the same church with you. Baldwin was shocked to learn that the church taught to hate other people, since selective love implies hatred to other human beings. Then, there was the clear opposition between the advocacy of the pastors and their attitudes outside the church. Pastors preached humility and simplicity; they taught that poverty was far from being a bad condition; it was rather a condition to reach God; they urge worshipers to give the offertory: "Happy be the poor; they will see God", says the Holy Bible, actually. But at the same time, the pastor owned and drove many Cadillac cars; they lived in high standard homes; they dressed clean. How could this be understandable? Did this mean that pastors just drove other people to God and didn't want to be there themselves? Finally, the church, rather than driving Black people out of fear and sin, have led the latter into living a life of real awe and terror; worshipers were conditioned into such a mood that announced no hope for them unless they became mean. They took no real initiative to their integration (page 71). A good black man should not relate to a white man; he who befriends white people was destined to hell, since the white man was a sinner (page 78). Yet, the white man was to be seen everywhere in America. Moreover, they were the masters in every domains of activity. Outside the church, no Black could pretend to do without the Whites. The church, the black man's church was then advocating a kind of racism, a separation of Whites and Blacks on the American land, which would be harmful to the Blacks and rather beneficial to the White, as since emancipation proclamation, the freed Blacks were seen as threats and were undesirable in the white man's environment. Such narrowmindedness and blindness was a hard experience for Baldwin and for many silent Blacks who where to stay in the church though because at least the church has a positive side: it nurtures their hope for a happier afterlife and takes the Blacks from their sorrow and painful resentment for a while.

The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will. There is no music like that, no drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord.I had never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church...to "rock"...when the church and I were one, where people near me surrendered their pain and joy to me, and mine to theirs, and the cries of "Amen!" and "Allelujah" and "Yes, Lord!" and Praise His name!" and Preach it, brother... (pages 33-34)

With such an image, it is clear that Baldwin's disillusion will eventually take him out the church and he clearly expresses it.: Blacks had to divorce from all the prohibitions, crimes and hypocrisies of the Christian church; if the concept of God has any validity or any use, it should be only to make the Blacks larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time one got rid of Him. (page 47).

3.3. The clash between Christianity and the Nation of Islam

With the failure of Christianity to meet Blacks hope and expectation following emancipation, a new religious movement appeared in America: the Nation of Islam headed by Elijah Mohammad. The Nation of Islam stood out as a clearly cut alternative for the Blacks' improvement. The aim of its leader was to draw the majority of, if not all, the Blacks to their cause. And the motto was also clear, to protect the most vulnerable people in the black American community, the women. "Protect your women", that was the sound message Elijah Mohammad would send his black compatriots (*The Fire Next Time*, page 77) The Nation of Islam was opposed to the kind of life Blacks were having in the street, marked with alcoholism and prostitution. Indeed, the Nation of Islam succeeded in getting many Blacks from alcohol and its most rational aftermath of criminality; it likewise succeeded in getting many women from prostitution. In Elijah's palace, water and soft drink are the only admitted beverages; all women in the public had to protect their body from any sexual appetite; there exists among Elijah's followers a true solidarity and mutual assistance. Those were what positive things Baldwin noticed from the Nation of Islam, which the church failed in achieving. Yet, above those three aspects, the Nation of Islam appeared as destructive as the church, for Blacks' integration in America. When Baldwin, after accepting Elijah Mohammad's invitation, was introduced to the latter's house, the first impression was the same he had with the pastors, and with reference to their living standards compared to the people they were supposed to lead to prosperity. "*I was frightened, because I had, in effect been summoned into a royal presence. I was frightened for another reason, too. I knew the tension in me between love and power, between pain and rage, and the curious, the grinding way I remained extended between these poles, perpetually attempting to choose the better rather than worse*" (*The Fire Next Time*, page 60). As with the church pastors, there was an enormous gap between Elijah Mohammad and his people from the Nation of Islam; and Baldwin immediately anticipated on the deity Elijah might represent in that community he was heading. Indeed, the appearance of Elijah in the room where Baldwin was led, and was made to wait, certified of the power he bore over his men and women. "*Something came into the room with him (Elijah); his disciples' joy at seeing him...*" (*The Fire Next Time*, page 63) Knowing that Elijah lived in that palace with those mentioned disciples, one can clearly understand that he stood as an earthly god-like personality, whose simple appearance or presence meant more than privilege and benediction. Such domination on the basis of religion basis would necessarily be more disastrous than productive for Blacks' integration. If today, Martin Luther King, Jr. is still commemorated in America and worldwide, it is due to the kind of philosophy and strategy he used, but most importantly the personality he showed.

King did not set his own personality forward; he acted and was accessible to everybody, Blacks and Whites. Elijah seemed so perfect a human being to his men and women that nobody dare contradict him. Every word, every remark and comment coming from him, especially when he described the white man, was universal truth. Around the table he offered food to welcome Baldwin, and from the other corner of that room when women were sitting, only applauses and approbations almost spontaneously and unanimously followed each statement he made. "Whenever Elijah spoke, a kind of chorus arose from the table, saying 'Yes, that's right'. This began to set my teeth on edge" (*The Fire Next Time*, page 76). The worse with the Nation of Islam, which made it similar to the churches, their pastors and followers, was that, if they proclaimed any love, that was exclusive; for Elijah, a good Black, that is a good Muslim (because as he said it to Baldwin, the God in the church is White; the only God for the Blacks is a Black God, and He was to be seen only in the Nation Of Islam's Temples), should never be seen with a white man. "And Elijah himself had a further, unnerveing habit, which was to ricochet his questions and comments off someone else on their way to you. Now, turning to the man on his right, he began to speak of the white devils with whom I had last appeared on TV: what had they made him (me) feel?" (*The Fire Next Time*, page 73). Elijah announced that the Nation of Islam had been collecting money in order to buy and own a separate land for the Black. Now, how could it be possible for Blacks to survive in America, on a separate land, or even as a separate nation? Elijah seemed to have forgotten the experience with the Harlem Ghettos, when the American government encouraged the white to leave the inner city and build their houses in the suburbs; the result was the programmed death of so many Blacks from cholera and other contagious diseases. If set as a different community, there would always exist ready-made policies to have the Blacks perish. This separatist approach advocated by Elijah was undoubtedly suicidal to the Blacks. Fortunately that Baldwin, although unsatisfied with the practices in the church, did not approve of the philosophy of the Nation of Islam as advocated by Elijah Mohammad.

4. Baldwin's Conclusion and Warning

The overall message Baldwin tries to put across through *The Fire Next Time* is two-fold; first, Baldwin seeks to incite Black people, to rise from their conceitedness which they adopted because of their past status as slaves. He urged Blacks to consider themselves now as free people, full American citizens; they should no more see the Whites as their masters, but rather as their fellows. The American Declaration of independence reads in its preamble that *All Men Are Created Equal*. Although this assertion came just to get rid of the British imperial parliament, king and government, the fact is that the American Constitution in force ever since has not altered the assertion. Blacks should know that the many centuries of the

practice of slavery has made the Whites dependent on the Blacks' labor. It is normal that the change in the Blacks' status be hard for the Whites to accept. It is then up to Blacks to fight make to true the unpaid for promissory note of the Constitution. Fighting here means working hard, integrating the whole American society despite the Whites' resistance. But, for Baldwin, the only way to succeed that integration is love; continuing to love someone who hates you will certainly eventually take him to reconsider his attitude. If Blacks continued rejecting the Whites, this would simply reinforce Whites in their motives for rejecting and denying the Blacks the right of citizenship, as guaranteed by the fourteenth amendment to the American Constitution

But Baldwin does not just call on the need of Blacks to love one another and accept their white compatriots. He goes further to warn both Blacks and Whites of the danger awaiting them in case the two races refused to accept each other and live as one integrated nation. For this, Baldwin uses a biblical reference: "*God gave Noah the rain bow sign; No more water, the fire next time*" (page 106). The message of Baldwin is clear: when God once noticed that there was much disorder, misunderstanding and atrocious attitudes within His people on earth, He chose the most sage of people, Noah, and asked the latter to build a boat, then Noah got inside the boat with his good people, with a couple of every animal species before God sent water to destroy the world. As a matter of fact, when the water eased off, only Noah and the occupants of the boat survived. Here, Baldwin is warning: everybody knows that destruction through fire is more atrocious than through water; and next time, it is fire God will send to destroy those who are a handicap to community life. Such a sound message, although set in the American context, a hundred years after emancipation proclamation for Blacks, is still relevant to the America of today, but also to the whole world fraught with killings, genocides, civil war, dictatorship plaguing millions of people, depriving them of their natural and legal rights.

Conclusion

The incisive essay *The Fire Next Time* depicts the growing severance between Christianity and the Nation of Islam. Baldwin argues the need to eradicate the oppression of Blacks through the joint efforts of both religions. Among all his works, *The Fire Next Time* holds a high literary stage because of the period and style, but also due to the address. Baldwin's essay came as a review over a new form of collaboration between two races for a century: the Whites and the Blacks whose status have changed from master-slave into co-citizens. Indeed, such abrupt change in condition, in any way, is difficult to accept, especially by those to whom the former state was more beneficial. But the message of Baldwin is clear,

Whites have to accept the new condition of the ex-slaves in the one hand, and the Blacks have to show love and acceptance to the Whites, the only condition to take the latter to change their mind, and for America to function as a homogenous nation.

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