Death, Racial Reconciliation, and the Mission of the Church – Baldwin's Perception

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Delivered during the 2010 Annual Meeting, Nilson explores novelist James Baldwin's reflections on the truth about racism and white supremacy. Whiteness, for Baldwin, functions as a kind of idolatry intimately connected with the fear of death. Although Baldwin never attempted to provide evidence for this observation, NIlson reveals a compelling proof through fascinating psychological experiments in Terror Management Theory (TMT). According to TMT, consciousness of one's mortality – "mortality salience" – often results in a heightened tolerance of prejudice and bias. For a Church that seems far more concerned with keeping its white members untroubled and content, the price for peace is the suffering of millions of its black brothers and sisters. Can an understanding of how TMT functions offer a solution?

"By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humankind; that is, she is a sign and an instrument of such

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union and unity." These are the familiar opening words of *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Yet their familiarity should not make us forget that they imply a commitment. If the Church is "a sign and an instrument of . . . union and unity," then reconciliation must be its first priority in situations scarred by alienation and enmity.

Cyprian Davis's *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* shows how the Roman Catholic Church in the United States has failed to meet the demands of its mission in the past.[3] Bryan N. Massingale's *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* shows that the Church's efforts in the present remain inadequate, to put it mildly.[4] Among the most recent statistics that testify to the Church's shortcomings are those from the Schott Foundation for Public Education.[5] Nearly 150 years after the legal abolition of slavery and nearly a half-century after the civil rights legislation of the 1960's, less than one-half of all black males graduate from high school and the percentage is lower in urban areas. No wonder that unemployment continues to cripple the black community at a rate double that of the white community. More than a third of all black children are growing up in poverty. On average, white families are five times as wealthy as black families. By

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[3] Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

[4] Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010).

[5] Bob Herbert, "Too Long Ignored," *New York Times*, 21 August 2010, A17. See also National Urban League, *State of Black America 2009: Message to the President*, ed. Stephanie J. Jones (N.p.: National Urban League, 2009).

every measure of the "quality of life," such as infant mortality, access to health care, and life expectancy, African Americans suffer much more than any other racial or ethnic group from multiple forms of brutal oppression.

Though James Baldwin died over twenty years ago, in 1987, he still participates in (what passes for) our national conversation about race. Not only does The Library of America keep his work in print,[6] but recently we have been reminded of his importance by the publication of *The Cross of Redemption*.[7] His perception of the deepest root and cause of the persistent racial disparities in this country still demands our attention - if we are serious about racial justice. If he were alive today, James Baldwin would not be surprised by the depth and breadth of black suffering.

He was not a philosopher or theologian or psychologist or sociologist. In fact, Baldwin did not even have a college degree. Rather, he considered himself an artist. For him, the task of the artist was not to entertain an audience but to discover and tell the truth. So the artist's vocation demanded a persistent and ruthless honesty with oneself and others.[8] The duty of the artist was to pierce through the soothing but

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[6] James Baldwin, *James Baldwin: Collected Essays,* ed. Toni Morrison (Library of America, 1998). Cited hereinafter as *Essays*.

[7] James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon, 2010). This is a collection of his writings that Toni Morrison did not include in the 1998 Library of America volume. Cited hereinafter as *Cross*.

[8] See, for example, "The Creative Process" written in 1962, *Essays*, 669-673, among many other possible citations that could be provided on this point.

dangerous illusions which people use to ward off unwelcome truths about their individual and collective lives.

Not only was Baldwin a truth-seeking and truth-telling artist, but he was African American. So he was well equipped to diagnose the sickness of white supremacy. As David Roediger notes, ". . . from folktales onward African Americans have been among the nation's keenest students of white consciousness and white behavior",[9] and Baldwin was among the keenest of the keen. And he knew that he was:

> You give me this advantage, that whereas you have never had to look at me, because you've sealed me away along with sin and death and all the other things you didn't want to look at, including love, my life was in your hands and I had to look at you. I know more about you, therefore, than you know about me. I've had to spend my life, after all – and all the other Negroes in country have had to spend their lives – outwitting and watching white people. I had to know what you were doing before you did it.[10]

Baldwin's step-father's soul-killing hatred of white people shaped him decisively, too. While he was still young, that counter-example taught him that hating whites would

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[9] David R. Roediger, "Introduction," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to be White,* ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 4.

[10] James Baldwin, *Cross*, 15. See also pages 68, 93, 128-9 in this book.

literally kill him, one way or another.[11]   So he developed compassion for those white people who are so trapped by their fears that they are deeply alienated from their true selves.[12]

I believe that, early in his career, Baldwin decided to find out what makes white supremacy so persistent. Why, despite all the legal measures enacted to achieve racial equality, all the moral exhortations to fairness, and the clear religious demands of justice and charity do people ". . . who have mastered Kant, Hegel, Shakespeare, Marx, Freud, and the Bible find this statement [that blacks want to be treated like human beings] so impenetrable?"[13] Baldwin came to perceive that the issue of color hides the deeper question of the self. Skin color is a symbol of deeper struggles.[14] He saw, therefore, that nothing less than white souls are at stake in the issue of white supremacy.

What do whites need to do to save their souls and overcome their self-estrangement? Whites want to keep blacks at a certain spatial and emotional distance to preserve their own sense of innocence and "to avoid being called to account for crimes committed by [their] forefathers, or by [their] neighbors."[15] So they must first face the ugly history of slavery in its pre- and post-Civil War forms and their own

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[11] James Baldwin, *Essays*, 84.

[12] Ibid., 311-312.

[13] Ibid., 177.

[14] Ibid., 341; see also 136.

[15] Ibid., 122.

complicity in it.[16] But then they must face their deepest fear of their own vulnerability and the certitude of their own impending death.

Baldwin perceived that the deepest root and cause of whites' oppression of black people, whether by active aggression or passive complicity, is white people's terror of their own certain future deaths. The mechanics of this terror underlie whites' sense that "those people" are not people I want to care about, not people I need to care about.[17] Subordinating blacks keeps whites from being paralyzed by the prospect of their life coming to an end. Thus, a "nameless fear that has nothing to do with Negroes" is the root of it all:[18]

> Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.[19]

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[16] See Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

[17] "The real meaning of race comes down largely to this: *Is this someone I should care about*?" Paul L. Wachtel, *Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Circle between Blacks and Whites* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 37.

[18] James Baldwin, *Essays*, 219-221.

[19] Ibid., 339. The original source of this quote is "Down at the Cross," which first appeared in *The New Yorker* on November 17, 1962 and was then reprinted in *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963). Indeed,

We must accept and embrace the full burden of our humanity that includes death, for only that truth can set us free. Face the fact that life is tragic, Baldwin urges.[20] Plunge into the fullness of life, the only light we have, and make yourself worthy of death.[21]

Without such courage, people will try to ground and validate their selves in some apparently enduring and transcendent reality that seems to give their lives a meaning and thus keeps the terror of meaningless annihilation at bay. For a white supremacist, whiteness (whatever it is!) confers a "symbolic immortality," an assurance that "I belong to something more enduring and worthwhile in which, somehow, I will continue to participate after I die." White supremacists create and maintain an illusion of whiteness both as skin color and as the standard for humanity at its best. Dwelling in that whiteness and living according to its folkways do not remove the brute terror of death but keep it from paralyzing them.

"His essays hit hardest when he seeks the origins of America's racial crisis not in the head-on collision of black and white, but in certain corner or the national psyche that we don't like to inspect too closely. . . [as Baldwin says elsewhere], America's failure 'to accept the reality of pain, of anguish, of ambiguity, of death has turned us into a very peculiar and sometimes monstrous people.'" Jeremy McCarter, "James Baldwin: The Fire This Time," *Newsweek*, 16 August 2010, 47.

[20] James Baldwin, *Essays,* 338-9.

[21] Ibid., 701.

White racists need to feel superior and not at all equal to blacks.[22] When whiteness is the standard for humanity, white racists can feel that black people somehow deserve their fate on account of some form of "inferiority" - biological, moral, intellectual, or cultural.[23] Segregation, even in its newer residential and economic forms, keeps them for having to encounter black people who would confront and destroy their illusions. Segregation leaves their images of "undeserving, inferior" black people unchallenged.[24]

Whiteness thus functions as an idol in precisely the way in which theologians like Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and Edward Farley describe idolatry, i.e., a finite reality is made to fill the role and place of the unnamable, uncontrollable Ultimate within which truly "we live and move and have our being." For these theologians, the heart of all "sin" is idolatry, seeking our ultimate security in some finite reality more knowable and, therefore, less mysterious and terrifying than the true God.

But these theologians discuss idolatry in general terms since the list of what or who might function as idol for another person or group is well-nigh endless. Baldwin's important contribution is to point out how the dynamism of idolatry works in racism/white supremacy. Indeed, he claims that this fear of death, this terror of the unknown that awaits

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[22] Ibid., 471, 337.

[23] Ibid., 174-5.

[24] For Baldwin, there is the added power dynamics of white guilt for slavery and the cruelties which followed, another reason to keep blacks out of sight as much as possible.

us all, is the deepest root of racism. Baldwin does not argue that this fear is the only reason and cause of racism. There are others – racism has many causes (that unacknowledged guilt, for instance) - but this one goes the deepest, he suggests. If white people would only come to terms with their tragic humanity, all the other supports for racism would evaporate. If whites were to stop using blacks to cope with their own fears, then maybe we can begin to work towards true reconciliation.

The fear of death that drives and maintains racism seemed clear and indisputable to Baldwin. But he does not try to prove this point in the two collections of his essays. He takes it as a given. So his intuition about the power of whites' fear of death remains a provocative claim in his work, not a demonstrated thesis. We may sense that Baldwin was on to something important, but we have to look elsewhere to discover exactly why he was right.

As it happens, though, there is a body of empirical evidence to support Baldwin. It is called Terror Management Theory or TMT.

Terror Management Theory

Nearly thirty years ago (1983), three social psychologists (Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszcznski, and Sheldon Solomon) with strong commitments to social transformation found themselves powerfully affected by Ernst Becker's *The Birth and Death of Meaning: A Perspective in Psychiatry and Anthropology* (1962), *The Birth and Death of Meaning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Problem of Man* (1971),

The Denial of Death (1973), and *Escape From Evil* (1975).[25] Becker's cultural overview seemed to show that the denial of death was the underlying dynamism in many otherwise puzzling forms of human behavior.[26] So the three psychologists developed a hypothesis: if Becker was right, there would be empirical evidence for the workings of this denial of death. One should be able to design experiments to determine whether or not there was such a thing and how it worked to create and maintain cultural death-denying "products," such as unjust social structures. If a subject's awareness of the prospect of their own impending death is enhanced ("mortality salience") and that person's shield against their fear of annihilation ("symbolic immortality") is threatened, they will do whatever is needed to re-establish full confidence in their particular idol; i.e., whatever it is that keeps their fear of death from paralyzing them.

"At the most fundamental level, cultures allow people to control the ever-present potential terror of death by convincing them that they are beings of enduring significance living in a meaningful reality. This is the core proposition of TMT."[27] But this "ever-present potential terror of death" is a "background" awareness, not a focal awareness. We can –

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[25] Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003).

[26] See also John S. Dunne, *The City of the Gods. A Study in Myth and Mortality*. New York: Macmillan, 1965.

[27] Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003), 16.

and do – keep a disturbing focal awareness at bay by denial. We can push death out of our immediate awareness. If you are reading about death and it makes you uncomfortable, you can just stop reading and do something else. But TMT deals with the awareness of death which operates in the background, so to speak. Since it is not immediately available to awareness, it cannot be pushed it away. So it can influence behavior in different ways.[28]

For instance, their first experiment asked 22 municipal court judges (15 male and 7 female), who had volunteered for the study, to set bond for an accused prostitute who had a prior conviction for the same offense six months earlier.[29] They would make their bond decision based on the information used in a normal court proceeding of this kind. But how would these judges, trained and experienced in making decisions based on a rational analysis of facts in relation to the law, be affected by being reminded that one day they would die? Just before they were asked to set bond, half the judges' mortality was rendered "salient" by a questionnaire in which they were asked to report on their own thoughts and feelings about death. After this, all the judges set the bond for the alleged prostitute. The judges who were not reminded about their own deaths set an average bond at around $50, but the "mortality salient"

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[28] Ibid., 55.

[29] Shannon K. McCoy, Tom Pyszcznski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, "Transcending the Self: A Terror Management Perspective on Successful Aging," in *Death Attitudes and the Older Adult. Theories, Concepts, and Applications*, ed. Adrian Tomer. (Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2000), 42.

judges set an average bond for the accused prostitute at roughly $450, nine times the amount set by the non-mortality salient judges. Judges whose values were challenged by someone with a different lifestyle imposed the more punitive bond. Other studies reveal that "mortality salience" heightens people's toleration of prejudiced remarks and attitudes.[30]

According to TMT, symbolic immortality requires ongoing social validation. "Others," whose ways and philosophies of life are very notably different, pose a challenge to the truth and power of the in-group's values. So they must avoid the "Others" as much as possible (via, e.g., residential segregation) and stereotype, de-humanize, and even demonize them. In these ways the in-group minimizes its sense of commonality with the "Others" because, if these others are as intelligent and moral and human (and thus deserving of attention and respect) as we are, chances are that "they may be right and we may be wrong!" So the Others must be kept in the prison of the caricature that makes them unworthy of care and attention. Thus, it becomes virtually certain that President Obama must be a Muslim without a U.S. birth certificate! Whites alone are the true citizens and Christians, not a black one like him. At the extreme, people will resort to horrendous violence to maintain the symbolic immortality of white supremacy. From

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[30] Ibid.,77, 80, 90. ". . . under mortality salient conditions, white Americans become rather sympathetic to other whites who express racist sentiments." Tom Pyszcznski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003), 90.

a TMT perspective, to call lynching a "reign of terror" is no figure of speech; it is exactly right.

At times, especially in its initial stages, TMT's pioneers overstated their case, presenting it as a sort of unified field theory in psychology that was able to explain nearly all human behavior. As late as 2000, they were saying that the terror of death was the fear that underlies all other fears,[31] the impulse that drives people to create meaning and value,[32] and claiming that all human evil is at root a TMT error.[33] Since then, however, they and other voices have added nuances, e.g., the proposal that TMT is a version of "control theory," which has been a well-established given in social psychology. Critics have also pointed out that many people will seek death rather than endure life as they experience it. So the fear of death cannot be as universal as they have had a tendency to claim in the past.

Now some 120 studies in 9 countries support TMT's credibility.[34] TMT sheds light not only on dramatic, public

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[31] Shannon K. McCoy, Tom Pyszcznski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, "Transcending the Self: A Terror Management Perspective on Successful Aging," in *Death Attitudes and the Older Adult. Theories, Concepts, and Applications*, ed. Adrian Tomer. (Philadelphia:Brunner-Routledge, 2000), 37.

[32] Ibid., 39.

[33] Tom Pyszcznski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003), 196.

[34] Jeff Greenberg, Mark Landau, Spec Kosloff, and Sheldon Solomon, "How Our Dreams of Death Transcendence Breed Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Conflict: Terror Management Theory," in *Handbook of Prejudice,*

events, such as the spectacle and mutilations ingredient to lynching, the battered face of Emmet Till, the faces in the rock-throwing white crowds of Birmingham, the bombings and burnings of churches, and the hate-filled mobs in Chicago that opposed Martin Luther King, but also the reason why white supremacy has not gone away but, rather underground, now that it is less acceptable in the public arena.[35]

At first glance, TMT seems to differ with those explanations of racism/white supremacy as a system that protects white economic privilege. But the economic and mortality views are not only compatible. They are actually complementary. Wealth offers security. Wealth furnishes protection against sickness, pain, physical danger, and other threats to mortality by providing access to quality medical care, expensive medications and treatments, and "safe" neighborhoods. Of course, wealth cannot completely eliminate anyone's vulnerability to the vicissitudes of life, but it certainly can diminish it. Thus, insofar as white supremacy maintains economic privilege, it is easy to understand why whites would cling to it in order to maintain a measure of security that can postpone death and keep reminders of it at bay.

Stereotyping, and Discrimination, ed. Todd D. Nelson (Hoboken: Psychology Press, 2009), 310.

[35] See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

Many TMT experiments had been conducted with students, who form a readily available pool of test subjects for university researchers.[36] What about the elderly? Their friends are dying, their bodies are weakened, and they have only to look in the mirror to see that most of their life is over. Their "mortality salience" is necessarily and consistently elevated. So they must re-organize psychologically - and many do. That is, they re-assess, if necessary, the meaning of their lives and make the corresponding adjustments.

Further TMT studies have found that authentic religious devotion can increase tolerance and decrease prejudice. Where institutional religion does not function as an idol, as it does in forms of fundamentalism, "Intrinsic religiosity and spirituality have been shown . . . to be protective against the anxiety associated with thoughts of death."[37]

What do these findings imply for a Church that understands the centrality of racial reconciliation and justice to its mission?

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[36] " . . . the human version of the laboratory white rat." Tom Pyszcznski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003), 47.

[37] Shannon K. McCoy, Tom Pyszcznski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, "Transcending the Self: A Terror Management Perspective on Successful Aging," in *Death Attitudes and the Older Adult. Theories, Concepts, and Applications*, ed. Adrian Tomer. (Philadelphia:Brunner-Routledge, 2000), 52. See also Adrian Tomer and Grafton Eliason, "Beliefs About Self, Life, and Death: Testing Aspects of a Comprehensive Model of Death Anxiety and Death Attitudes," in ibid., 149.

The Mission of the Church

Consider the Catholic Church's role and record vis-à-vis white supremacy. The Church clearly has a role (indeed, a God-given role) to play in the struggle against racism because "by her relationship with Christ, the Church is [supposed to be] a kind of sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humankind; that is, she is [supposed to be] a sign and an instrument of such union and unity." Yet, as Davis, Massingale, the annual reports of the Urban League and a multitude of other witnesses have shown, the Church's failure to live up to the requirements of its own identity is obvious, however well-intentioned its efforts might have been.[38] Yet, if the terror of death is in fact racism's deepest root, there is a clearer vision of what must be done to put an end to this great evil.

One of the chief functions of a "culture" is to provide some form of "symbolic immortality." [39] TMT's experiments have also shown that "whiteness" is often embraced precisely as a form of "symbolic immortality" that confers a sense of transcendent worth and superiority. While the Church remains ultimately guided by and grounded in God, it is no less a human cultural construction.

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[38] The case of the diocese of Gary, Indiana, under the leadership of Bishop Dale Melzcek is one notable exception.

[39] On this function of culture, see Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 32.

So, in a racist society, such as the United States,[40] we must constantly entertain the likelihood of the Church's complicity in white supremacy. Lonergan warns that "there is always a great need to eye very critically any religious individual or group and to discern beyond the very real charity they may well have been granted the various types of bias that may distort or block their exercise of it."[41] Cyprian Davis's history and Bryan Massingale's account of his unsuccessful efforts to get Church leaders to confront and condemn white privilege as a structure that protects economic advantage confirm the wisdom of Lonergan's warning.[42] No wonder that Baldwin claims, "It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being . . . must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church."[43]

Baldwin's perceptions about whites' fear of death and TMT's supporting evidence makes the Church's ineffectiveness more understandable. Many whites cling to their "supremacy" to keep death at bay. So the linkage

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[40] See Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2000) for the argument that this is not empty rhetoric.

[41] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 284.

[42] Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Orbis Books, 2010), 80-81.

[43] James Baldwin, *Essays*, 314.

between poverty and white supremacy[44] goes unaddressed and the Church as a whole sees no compelling reason to make reconciliation, equality, and true community with their black sisters and brothers its first priority. "We [even] have an amazing tolerance for black pain," said Jesse Jackson, reflecting on the horrors of Katrina, but this tolerance is perhaps not so amazing in light of TMT. Too many white people feel that too many black people – in some way for some reason – actually deserve their pain.[45]

How can the Church terminate its participation in the conspiracy to deny death (Becker) and become the community where death is befriended, in the memorable image of the late Cardinal Bernardin? How can its members find the power to embrace the suffering needed to reverse the evil of white supremacy?[46] Suffering seems like the "third rail" of white American Christianity. That is, if you want to survive and thrive as a minister in the Church, don't touch it! From the pulpit, we rarely hear not only what suffering might

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[44] See "Poverty and Racism. Overlapping Threats to the Common Good," a position paper issued by Catholic Charities in 2008.
http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/NetCommunity/Document.Doc?id=6 14 .

[45] He added, "There's a historical indifference to the pain of poor people and black people" in this country. Doug Simpson, "Jesse Jackson lashes out at Bush over Katrina response," *Associated Press*, 2006. http://www.wwltv.com/cgi-bin/bi/gold_print.cgi. I am grateful to Bryan N. Massingale for this reference.

[46] See Lonergan's *Method* on suffering, 291. After all, "A key dilemma confronting us is that . . . the path toward resolving our historic injustices leads through pain." Paul Wachtel, *Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Circle between Blacks and Whites* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 184.

mean but also why it might be necessary and important to suffer.[47] Where are the sermons preached with the courage and insight of a James Baldwin when he says, "The failure on our part to accept the reality of pain, of anguish, of ambiguity, of death, has turned us into a very peculiar and sometimes monstrous people. It means, for one thing, and it's very serious, that people who have had no experience have no compassion."[48]

A Church that is ignorant of or indifferent to Black suffering is simply a sort of religious country club of the comfortable led by the comfortable for the advantage of the comfortable. Or, as James Cone says, the Church becomes the chaplain for sick middle class egos.[49] For a Church preoccupied with keeping its members contented and untroubled, the dangers of embracing suffering are great. But the costs of ignoring it are high, too. Not only do millions of black lives continue to be broken by white supremacy, but the Church also goes on betraying its true identity as a sign and instrument of union and unity.

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[47] Recall Baldwin above about the avoidance of suffering making us monstrous.

[48] James Baldwin, *Cross*, 64. Elsewhere he observes, "I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering – enough is as good as a feast – but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are." *Essays*, 343.

[49] James H. Cone, "The White Church and Black Power," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, Volume One, 2nd rev., eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 78. The text is from his *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

So this Church which has fled from suffering has no alternative. It can only recover its identity, embrace its mission, and become a suffering Church, tutored by the traditions and practices of the Black church. Then it will learn what James Baldwin learned years ago; namely that

> The blacks did not so much use Christian symbols as recognize them – recognize them for what they were before the Christians came along – and, thus, reinvested the symbols with their original energy. The proof of this is, simply, the continued existence and authority of the blacks: it is through the creation of the black church that an unwritten, dispersed, and violated inheritance has been handed down.

Then, as that inheritance is re-appropriated, the terror of death that paralyzes and alienates us from one another will be replaced by a freedom that no power on earth can take away, for

> One is confronted with the agony and nakedness and the beauty of a power which has no beginning and no end, which contains you, and which you contain, and which will be using you when your bones are dust. One thus confronts a self both limited and boundless, born to die and born to live. The creature is, also, the creation, and responsible, endlessly, for that perpetual act of creation which is both the self and more than the self. One is set

free, then, to live among one's terrors, hour by hour and day by day, alone, and yet never alone.[50]

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[50] James Baldwin, *Essays*, 566; Roediger, David R. "Introduction." In *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to be White,* ed. David R. Roediger, 1-26. New York: Schocken Books, 1998; Simpson, Doug. "Jesse Jackson lashes out at Bush over Katrina response." *Associated Press*, 2006. http://www.wwltv.com/cgi-bin/bi/gold_print.cgi; Wachtel, Paul L. *Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Circle between Blacks and Whites.* New York: Routledge, 1999.

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