


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Divine and mortal loves

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### Abstract

‘If the concept of God has any validity or any use’, James Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*, ‘it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.’ This article is a meditation on Baldwin’s claim. I begin by presenting Baldwin’s account of a grave danger that characterizes our social lives – a source of profound estrangement from ourselves and from one another. I draw on the work of the theologian Howard Thurman in order to explain how faith in a loving God can enable us to cope with this danger in a manner that may render us, in some sense, larger, freer, and more loving. Finally, I sketch Baldwin’s account of how we might cope with this danger not by relying on God’s love, but rather by relying in certain ways on our love for one another.

**Keywords:** James Baldwin; Howard Thurman; faith in God; shame; love

### Introduction

‘If the concept of God has any validity or any use’, James Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*, ‘it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him’ (Baldwin (1998b), 314). Characterizing Baldwin’s religious views with any greater precision than this is notoriously difficult.<sup>1</sup> The stepson of a harsh, embittered preacher and laborer in Harlem, New York, Baldwin became a ‘junior minister’ at the age of fourteen and acquired a large, enthusiastic following (Leeming (1994), 25). But he soon grew frustrated by the hypocrisy and spiritual poverty of the Christian church. In many of the Black churches that he encountered, congregants donated their hard-earned ‘dimes and quarters’, and ministers simply used this money to buy ‘houses and Cadillacs’ for themselves (Baldwin (1998b), 309). More importantly, these churches failed to cultivate love among their members, serving instead to shield the members from unwelcome aspects of reality and to mask their ‘self-hatred and despair’ (*ibid.*). And the White churches did not fare any better, morally speaking. To the contrary, those churches occupied far more sinister roles, having served for generations to justify – indeed, to *sanctify* – the subjugation of Black people. Baldwin often found that, as he surveyed his congregation from the pulpit, he had to fight the urge to tell them to ‘throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home’ (*ibid.*). Eventually, he grew tired of this fight and ‘walked out’ of God’s house (Baldwin (1998c), 362).

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Nevertheless, it seems, when Baldwin walked out, he carried remnants of his earlier, religious life with him; and these remnants continued to inform his life and work. First, the language of the Bible and the Black church structure and run throughout Baldwin's essays and fiction. For example, *The Fire Next Time* opens with an expression of hope in the face of overwhelming odds, drawn from the spiritual 'Free at Last': 'The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off' (Baldwin (1998b), 294). And it closes with a stark reminder, drawn from the spiritual 'Mary Don't You Weep', of what is at stake in the struggle for racial justice in America: 'God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!' (*ibid.*, 347). Second, the moral psychology and the moral and political philosophy that Baldwin develops in his work rest on religious ideas – the fall from grace,<sup>2</sup> redemptive love,<sup>3</sup> the new Jerusalem,<sup>4</sup> and so on – that Baldwin develops in novel ways and employs in the course of a *secular* project.

I want to examine some of these remnants and consider what we might learn from them. Put roughly, I will appeal to some of Baldwin's views about our psychology in order to explain how faith in a loving God can – sometimes – make us larger, freer, and more loving; and I will appeal to elements of his moral and political philosophy in order to consider, briefly, how those of us who lack such faith might get along without it. More precisely, I will begin by presenting Baldwin's account of a grave danger that characterizes our social lives – a source of profound estrangement from ourselves and from one another. I will then draw on the work of the theologian Howard Thurman in order to explain how faith in a loving God can enable us to cope with this danger. I will also sketch Baldwin's account of how we might cope with this danger not by relying on God's love, but rather by relying in certain ways on our love for one another. And I will conclude by presenting some concerns that a more complete reconstruction and defence of Baldwin's views might address.<sup>5</sup>

## Shame

### *The 'central danger' of our social lives*

In his late essay 'Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood', Baldwin claims that 'humiliation is the central danger' of our social lives (Baldwin (1998e), 817). According to Baldwin, we view ourselves, constantly and unavoidably, through the eyes of others, and our understanding and evaluation of ourselves depends, to a considerable degree, on these others' real or imagined judgements about us and about our characteristics. This process by which our self-knowledge and self-esteem is built up or maintained or undermined by others begins in childhood, as we respond to, and often internalize, our parents' judgements. Reflecting on the powerful, lasting influence that a parent's judgement – 'the crucial, the definitive, and all-but-everlasting judgment' – can have on a child's psychological development, Baldwin considers how his view of himself was distorted, well into adulthood, by his stepfather's repeated, cruel insistence that he was an ugly child (*ibid.*). Indeed, Baldwin writes, 'I was to hurt a great many people by being unable to imagine that anyone could love an ugly boy like me' (Baldwin (1998f), 833). As we grow older, the 'gallery of Others' whose gaze helps shape our understanding and evaluation of ourselves broadens to include our other family members, our friends, our lovers, our enemies, and strangers whose judgements, taken together, help make up the dominant attitudes in our communities (Baldwin (1998e), 817).

Herein lies the danger. Because we tend to be shaped, in the manner that I just described, by others' views of us, it is 'virtually impossible' for us to develop a sense of who we are and a sense of our own worth without 'the collaboration and corroboration of others'; and there is never any guarantee that such collaboration and corroboration

will be forthcoming (*ibid.*). Approaching this point from a different direction, all of us have shortcomings of character and personality that others might recognize. Furthermore, even if we set aside these shortcomings, all of us inhabit non-ideal communities in which others may view us through the lens of some deeply entrenched, but wholly unwarranted, prejudice. So, all of us are, at some time or other, vulnerable to being despised by those others on whom our self-knowledge and self-esteem substantially depend. When we are so despised – that is, when others regard us with contempt – we are apt to become deeply ashamed of who we are; and such shame may wreak havoc with our lives, and with our relationships with people around us.

### Contempt and shame

In order to assess the damage that may be wrought by such humiliation, I must say more about the nature of contempt and the nature of shame. Macalester Bell (2013) identifies the features of contempt that are most relevant to my discussion. On her view, when others regard us with contempt, they see us as having some ‘failing or defect’ that matters to them, and in light of this defect, our status is somehow diminished – we are rendered ‘inferior’ to them, or to some standard that they dare not sink below (Bell (2013), 37 and 41). Unlike resentment, which typically focuses on a person’s actions and constitutes a response to their perceived wrongdoing, contempt focuses on ‘the whole person’ and constitutes a response to some feature in light of which that person, considered as a whole, is compromised (*ibid.*, 40). When others see us as compromised in this way, they tend to be motivated to ‘withdraw’ from us, and so, when we are despised by people around us, we are thereby estranged from them (*ibid.*, 44).

When others regard us with contempt and we view ourselves through their eyes, we are apt to become ashamed of who we are. While contempt involves seeing others as compromised in some important respect, shame involves a painful awareness of *being seen* in a compromised position. Indeed, ‘the basic experience of shame’, Bernard Williams writes, ‘is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition’ (Williams (2008), 78). But, to be clear, and as Williams points out, the gaze that elicits our shame may be that of a real person, for example, a parent or spouse who sees us behave in some unworthy manner; or it may issue from some merely imagined point of view that we have internalized. When we experience shame, our ‘whole being seems diminished’, and we may harbour ‘not just the desire to hide, or to hide my face, but the desire to disappear, to not be there’ (*ibid.*, 89).<sup>6</sup>

### Destructive consequences of shame

The various psychological and behavioural consequences of shame that are most relevant to my discussion may be divided into two broad categories, namely, *destructive* and *ameliorative* consequences. Turning first to the destructive consequences, our shame may prompt us respond in ways that tend to diminish us, and to estrange us from ourselves and from other people. For example, it may prompt us to try to escape the condemnatory gaze of the other by withdrawing from the community of people who judge us. Of course, this route to escape can only take us so far; after all, even if we withdraw from *actual* people, we may nevertheless carry the internalized gaze of the other with us.

To consider another – less obvious – destructive response, we might try to escape the other’s condemnatory gaze by hiding in plain sight, as it were; that is, we might remain in society, but adopt behaviours and attitudes that make it harder for others to see – indeed, make it harder for *us* to see – our despised characteristics. This response to shame plays an especially prominent role in Baldwin’s fiction and his essays. Consider

the character of Eric in Baldwin's novel *Another Country*. The novel examines the lives of a group of Americans who bear various relationships to Rufus Scott – a talented, young Black man who has committed suicide. Eric is among these surviving loved ones and acquaintances who are left struggling to understand their own identities, and to understand their relationships to one another, after Rufus's death. Eric is White and from the American South, and he was Rufus's friend and lover.

Eric comes, eventually, to accept his sexual desire for other men and, more broadly, to accept himself. But such same-sex desire was despised in the communities that Eric inhabited during his youth – 'how hard it was to be despised', he laments, 'how impossible not to despise oneself!' – and, throughout the novel, he reflects on his attempts to escape others' contempt by adopting actions and attitudes that masked this desire (Baldwin (1998g), 598). He recounts dating a few girls whose names he can no longer recall, and he suggests that 'I might . . . have had them around just on account of Rufus – trying to prove something, maybe, to him and to myself' (*ibid.*, 578). And, reflecting on his brief affair with a married woman – another of Rufus's surviving friends – he concludes that he had the affair partly because he 'dreamed of escape' from 'his shame and his battle', namely, his battle to see and accept himself as he is (*ibid.*, 669 and 545). In addition to considering his own temptation to mask, or try to mask, his sexual desire in ways that would enable him to escape others' contempt, Eric reflects on his encounters with an 'army of lonely men' who yielded to that same temptation (*ibid.*, 553). Those men were 'husbands, fathers, gangsters, football players, rovers'; and they harboured longings that they 'spent their lives denying . . . and which could only be satisfied in the shameful, the punishing dark' (*ibid.*, 554).

Our shame can yield destructive consequences in yet a different way by leading us to lash out in anger at people who humiliate us. Baldwin's work includes examples of this common response to shame, but we find somewhat clearer, more prominent examples in the fiction of one of Baldwin's philosophical and literary influences, namely, Fyodor Dostoevsky.<sup>7</sup> In particular, Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is brimming with characters who are brought low in various respects, and who lash out in various ways at the agents of their humiliation.

Consider an encounter between two of the novel's central characters, namely, Alyosha Karamazov – a young novice monk described as the 'hero' of the novel – and Grushenka – a beautiful, strong-willed young woman at the centre of a scandalous romantic rivalry between Alyosha's father and his older brother (Dostoevsky (1992), 3).<sup>8</sup> During a spiritual crisis brought on by a great personal loss, Alyosha goes to Grushenka's house, harbouring a dim awareness that she hopes to seduce him, stir up further scandal, and thereby ruin him. Grushenka starts teasing Alyosha playfully, but soon learns about his loss and the ensuing crisis. She responds to his vulnerability with gentleness and compassion, and then, in a beautifully rendered scene, the two of them issue and reciprocate a series of expressions of compassion and acceptance. During the course of this exchange, Grushenka reveals that her earlier hostility towards Alyosha was rooted in her shame. She explains that she regarded Alyosha 'as my conscience', and she thought, 'how a man like him must despise a bad woman like me' (*ibid.*, 350). Being in Alyosha's presence made her 'feel ashamed, ashamed of myself', and her shame made her 'so angry' that she became determined to 'ruin' Alyosha, to 'eat him up and laugh' (*ibid.*, 350 and 354).<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the pain of humiliation may render life unbearable for us, and in that case, we may seek to escape our anguish by committing suicide, that is, by destroying ourselves and escaping life itself. Return to the character of Rufus Scott, whose brief life and tragic death form the narrative centre of *Another Country*. Rufus, who grew up in a Black ghetto in Harlem, New York, is beautiful and full of promise, but nearly every aspect of public life in his society conveys that, because he is Black, he is inferior – his life does not matter.

What Baldwin describes elsewhere as ‘the unendurable frustration of being always, everywhere inferior’ leaves Rufus deeply and irreparably wounded (Baldwin (1998a), 52). Indeed, Rufus reveals these wounds when he cries out, during an argument with a White liberal friend,

You got to fight with the landlord because the landlord’s *white!* You got to fight with the elevator boy because the motherfucker’s *white*. Any bum on the bowery can shit all over you because maybe he can’t hear, can’t see, can’t walk, can’t fuck, but he’s *white!* (Baldwin (1998g), 425–426)

Eventually, this relentless struggle becomes more than Rufus can bear, and he hurls himself off the George Washington Bridge and falls to his death.

When our shame prompts us to adopt any of these destructive responses, we thereby become estranged, or deepen our estrangement, from ourselves or from people around us. When our shame prompts us to withdraw from other people, it thereby prevents us from maintaining or achieving communion with them. When it leads us to try to escape others’ contempt by adopting attitudes and behaviours that mask our despised characteristics, this undermines others’ ability to know us as we are, and it might undermine our ability to know ourselves. When it leads us to lash out in anger at the agents of our humiliation, this tends to rouse further hostility and conflict. And if our humiliation becomes unendurable and prompts us to take our own lives, it thereby turns us against ourselves and rules out the possibility of communion with others.

#### *Ameliorative consequences of shame*

However, these destructive responses only tell us part of the story of shame’s role in our psychological and social lives. Our shame might prompt us, instead, to adopt *ameliorative* responses that tend to help us achieve self-understanding and self-esteem, and draw us into communion with other decent people. More precisely, as Herbert Morris (1976, 62) points out, our shame – our painful awareness of being seen in a compromised condition – can lead us to examine ourselves with clear eyes and take on the task of changing, for the better, some aspect of who we are. For example, we might try to alter some character or personality trait that we deem unworthy on reflection, and we might thereby ‘becom[e] a person that is not shameful’ (*ibid.*). Or, to consider another type of example that Morris does not discuss, if we possess some racial or sexual or other social identity that, in light of entrenched social prejudice, dominant members of our society despise, we may come to alter, and thereby improve, the perspective in light of which we view and evaluate that identity. We might, in other words, alter our *values* in such a way that the despised trait no longer counts, from our perspective, as a significant defect, or no longer determines how we regard ourselves as a whole.

To be clear, we cannot make either type of change simply or directly, say, through a bare act of will. But, in the right circumstances, we can adopt patterns of thought and behaviour that help bring about both sorts of changes over time. Someone who tends, say, to engage in some behaviour that she deems unworthy on reflection may keep company with people who gently discourage her from engaging in that behaviour, she may avoid people who facilitate her engaging in it, or she might attend to the behaviour’s negative consequences. And someone who is ashamed of some aspect of his social identity, say, his race or his sexual orientation, may keep company with people who take pride in that identity, he may immerse himself in narratives about people who share the identity and flourish, or he may reflect on his grounds for dismissing as mere prejudice the prevailing, negative attitudes towards the identity. Of course, a person in these latter

circumstances may be best able to alter his negative view of his own social identity – and so, best able to flourish – if the widespread prejudice against his social group is eradicated or greatly diminished, say, through the efforts of some social movement. But, even if the prejudice persists among dominant members of his society, he may come to alter his own perspective – and he may thereby survive, or even flourish in important respects – if he finds a community of people within the larger society who recognize and affirm his worth.

Now return to the danger that Baldwin describes. We see ourselves through others' eyes. These others may come to despise us. As a result, we may come to feel ashamed of ourselves and respond to our shame in ways that wreak havoc with our lives and our relationships. We cannot escape this danger entirely; it is simply part of being a social creature whose self-understanding and self-esteem depend, in ways I described above, on others' judgements. Nevertheless, we can adopt attitudes and behaviours that mitigate this danger to some degree, enabling us to cope with it. I now want to consider how faith in God can help us cope with this danger by encouraging us to respond to our shame, not by withdrawing or hiding or lashing out, but rather by acknowledging our despised characteristics and taking on the ameliorative project of altering those characteristics, or altering the perspective in light of which we view the characteristics.

## Divine love

### *Faith in a loving God*

The kind of faith in God that I will discuss here is structurally similar to types of faith that, I have argued elsewhere, we might have in other human beings, or in ourselves. For example, a teacher's faith in a disadvantaged student may prompt her to judge that, with the right forms of support and encouragement, the student can master his college coursework, despite getting off to a somewhat rocky start. Or a new father, who suddenly confronts the rigors of parenthood and finds himself stricken with self-doubt, might summon sufficient faith in himself to quiet his anxiety and face these new challenges.<sup>10</sup> Like these common, secular varieties of faith, the kind of faith in God that I will discuss has certain characteristic cognitive, volitional, and emotional elements.<sup>11</sup>

### *The cognitive element of faith*

Turning first to the cognitive element, someone who has the relevant sort of faith in God is disposed to believe that God exists, and that God has certain favourable characteristics, even in the face of grounds for doubt. Of course, people of faith who adhere to different religious traditions may conceive of God in very different ways, and so they may be disposed to form very different beliefs about God. Some may judge that God is a unique and elevated kind of person who possesses certain moral virtues to the highest degree, while others claim that God is *impersonal*, and therefore cannot possess moral virtues at all; some may claim that God has performed this or that miracle, while others deny this claim; and so on. I want to consider how faith in God might help us cope with the danger of humiliation when that faith disposes us to believe that God is the supremely good creator of our world, that God sees us and knows us as we are, and that God loves us. Such faith may prompt someone to judge that there is something beautiful and good at work in the universe, even when the world around her seems full of wickedness and suffering. It may prompt her to affirm that God exists and that God loves her, even when the difficult circumstances of her life make it hard for her to feel God's presence. Or it may lead her to acknowledge that God sees her as she is, even when she feels reluctant to face her own shortcomings.



### *The volitional element of faith*

Second, faith in God has a volitional element; it involves the will. Someone who has such faith is not only disposed to believe certain central claims about God's existence and characteristics, but also *invested* in these claims. It is important to her that these claims, and the basic conception of God that these claims help make up, turn out to be true in some sense, and she may suffer considerable distress if, in the face of decisive evidence or in the wake of some form of conversion, she comes to believe that they are deeply mistaken. Beyond this, it is important to her that she recognize and appreciate God's characteristics. She seeks, in other words, to know God – to the extent that this is possible for her – and to venerate or delight in God's nature.<sup>12</sup>

This second, volitional aspect of faith in God bears an important relation to the first. Because the person of faith is invested in the truth of some basic conception of God, and because she cares about recognizing and appreciating God's characteristics, she is apt to handle relevant evidence in ways that make her more likely to believe certain claims about God. More precisely, she tends to approach relevant circumstances and experiences with characteristic forms of openness and attention. These attitudes help determine how she perceives herself and her circumstances, and, ultimately, they help determine what she believes about God. For example, when a person of faith considers the cosmos as a whole, or merely considers her local surroundings under certain conditions, features of her surroundings that, say, elicit wonder or indicate significant connections among various elements of the whole may leap to the foreground of her thought, while other features recede into the background. She might, in other words, attend to the world in ways that dispose her to see it, if only for brief periods and in certain contexts, as marvellous – as sublime. Or, to take another sort of example, if a person of faith experiences a deep sense of peace during some period of personal turmoil, it might occur to her to interpret this feeling as an awareness of God's presence, and she may dwell on this interpretation. Such patterns of attention and perception might enable her to notice and appreciate evidence of God's presence or activity; indeed, they may lead her to conclude that the view that there is a supremely good and loving God better accords with her total experience than the denial of this view.

The fact that faith in God tends to influence one's beliefs in these ways may lead some to dismiss such faith as epistemically irrational. I will not respond to this charge in detail here. My main aim in this section is merely to explain how faith in God can help us respond to the danger of humiliation that Baldwin describes, and even if we dismiss such faith as epistemically irrational, thinking about such faith may teach us valuable lessons about how to cope with this danger. However, I will mention two factors in light of which the tension between faith in God and epistemic rationality is not nearly as great as it might initially appear. First, as I just explained, a person of faith is disposed to form certain beliefs about God largely because she exhibits certain patterns of openness and attention and, as a result, tends to see the world in certain characteristic ways. I grant that these attitudes might lead some people of faith to form irrational beliefs in some circumstances, but, in faith at its best, these attitudes do not typically lead a person to believe irrationally. Rather, these attitudes serve partly as *correctives* for other psychological phenomena that tend to obscure reality. Many of us are so self-absorbed or chronically distracted that we often fail to notice the beauty and sublimity of the world around us, we fail to reflect in any depth on those experiences that could be regarded as encounters with the divine, and so on. The patterns of receptiveness and attention that are associated with faith in God can enable us to recognize and respond to evidence of God's presence and God's nature that, due to our natural self-absorption and chronic distraction, we might otherwise have overlooked.<sup>13</sup>

Second, in faith at its best, the person of faith remains sensitive to new, incoming evidence that bears on her beliefs about God. As grounds for doubt, say, about God's existence grow quite strong, her degree of confidence that God exists may wane; she may come to believe not that God exists, but rather that God's existence is, say, more likely than the alternative;<sup>14</sup> or she might cease to believe that God exists and, instead, merely *accept* that God exists, where acceptance – unlike belief – is a voluntary decision to use some claim or set of claims, in certain contexts, as premises in one's theoretical or practical reasoning.<sup>15</sup> Finally, if the available evidence against God's existence becomes overwhelming, she may reject altogether the view that God exists. In short, faith is compatible with a high degree of intellectual responsibility.

### *The emotional element of faith*

The third major element of faith in God is an emotional element, namely, a form of *courage*. Put briefly, when someone has faith in God and lives in accord with this faith, she is thereby exposed to certain characteristic dangers; however, her faith disposes her to feel encouraged to face these dangers for the sake of worthwhile ends. Imagine that someone comes to believe, through faith, that God exists and that God possesses certain characteristics, and imagine that this person structures her life, or some important part of her life, around these beliefs. The beliefs might, of course, turn out to be mistaken, and so, by having faith in God and living in accord with this faith, this person takes on considerable risks. For example, if some of her cherished beliefs about God turn out to be mistaken for reasons that she later comes to recognize, then she may become greatly disappointed. Beyond this, and more importantly, if it turns out that God does not exist at all, then her efforts, say, to cultivate a relationship with God, to obey God's commandments, or to devote herself to God's glory might end up making a fool of her, constituting a tragic waste of her energy and attention, or imposing pointless sacrifices on people around her.

Of course, a morally and prudentially conscientious person who has faith in God thinks and behaves in ways that mitigate some of these risks to a considerable degree. For example, she recognizes that the beliefs that she adopts through faith may be mistaken, and, as I noted above, she remains sensitive to new, incoming evidence that bears on the truth of these beliefs. If the evidence against these beliefs becomes strong enough, she may revise or abandon them. Furthermore, such a person recognizes the costs that she and others may bear if she behaves in some way in light of her faith in God, but her beliefs about God turn out to be wrong. She takes on significant risks only when it seems that there is something of sufficient significance at stake, and she aims, especially, to limit the costs that she imposes on other people. Nevertheless, she cannot eliminate entirely the risks associated with her faith in God. Such faith disposes her to adopt beliefs that have highly significant implications concerning how she should live, and these beliefs may turn out to be wildly mistaken. So, she cannot eliminate the risk that her faith will lead her to think and act in ways that make a fool of her or waste her energy and attention.<sup>16</sup> And, because she is invested in the truth of certain of these beliefs, she cannot shield herself from the emotional cost of the disappointment that she will endure if she comes to recognize that those beliefs are misguided.

The emotional element of faith in God is a kind of courage to face such risks, while exercising due care, in the course of striving to lead a good life in light of one's best understanding of oneself and one's relation to the cosmos. Put another way, a conscientious person who has faith in God has sufficient intellectual humility to recognize that the beliefs that she adopts through faith may turn out to be mistaken, and so having and living in accord with her faith necessarily involves a kind of danger. But she tends to feel encouraged to face this danger, with due care, for the sake of worthwhile ends.



### *A theistic response to the danger of humiliation*

Setting aside any questions concerning the otherworldly benefits that this sort of faith in God – with its three characteristic elements – may bring, such faith can help us cope, in *this* world, with the danger of humiliation. When other people, on whom our self-understanding and self-esteem depend, come to despise us, we may become deeply ashamed of who we are. Our shame may render us profoundly estranged from ourselves, namely, by prompting us to think and behave in ways that make it harder for us to see our own despised characteristics; and it may render us profoundly estranged from people around us, namely, by leading us to withdraw from them or hide our despised characteristics from them or lash out at them. But if we have faith in God, we are disposed to believe, even in the face of grounds for doubt, that God is the supremely good creator of our world, that God sees us as we are, and that God loves us; and we tend to feel encouraged to live in light of these judgements. To be clear, adopting these judgements does not eliminate the risk that others will despise us and that we, as a result, will come to despise ourselves; as I explained above, this risk is an inescapable part of our social lives. Nevertheless, adopting these beliefs renders us more apt to respond to our shame not by withdrawing, by masking who we are, or by lashing out at people who judge us, but rather by examining ourselves with clear eyes and either altering the perspective in light of which we view ourselves or altering our shameful characteristics.

Put roughly, when we believe that the supremely good creator of our world sees us as we are and loves us without reservation, may come to feel that, although we are estranged from ourselves and from other people in certain respects, we are, in some important sense, reconciled to all creation. Because we recognize an authoritative perspective from which we are both seen and embraced, we may gradually stop viewing ourselves from the perspective of other people who despise us and regard us, on the whole, as something inferior; and we may begin to regard ourselves, instead, as human beings who possess full human worth, and who are wholeheartedly accepted.<sup>17</sup> This shift in our perspective tends to ease the psychic pressure to look away from those aspects of ourselves that arouse our shame and elicit others' contempt. In some cases, looking at ourselves with clear eyes may lead us to accept, or even celebrate, our characteristics as they are. In other cases, taking an honest look at ourselves may prompt us to work towards altering those characteristics that we deem unworthy on reflection. The kind of faith in God that I have described steers us towards these ameliorative responses to our shame by disposing us to believe that we are both seen and embraced from an authoritative point of view.

### *Thurman's theistic response (1): accepting ourselves*

In his superb book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman, a Black American theologian and pastor, offers illuminating discussions of the process by which faith in God may prompt us to adopt these ameliorative responses to our shame.<sup>18</sup> Thurman, like Baldwin after him, recognized that the Christian church often failed to offer genuine consolation for oppressed people, and that it often served, instead, to justify socially and politically powerful people's domination and exploitation of the powerless. He sought to communicate the central message of Christianity in a manner that would enable oppressed people – people who stand 'with their backs against the wall' – to endure their oppression and resist it, without falling into despair or losing their humanity (Thurman (1976), 1).

During a discussion of the sense of inferiority that plagues the powerless, Thurman explains how oppressed people's faith in God can enable them to develop 'a profound

sense of personal worth' and accept themselves as they are (*ibid.*, 40). To take one of Thurman's central examples, consider the plight of Black people in the United States, who had laboured for generations within a system of White racial domination. Almost all aspects of American public life communicated the assumption that Black people were inferior, that their lives did not matter: Black Americans were subject to the threat of lynching and mob violence, they were harassed and preyed upon by the same police who were charged with their protection, and they were systematically excluded from opportunities to gain adequate housing, education, and employment. Black Americans' relentless confrontation with such expressions of 'contempt' – with the judgement that 'you do not count' and the fact that 'no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person' – often produced devastating psychic consequences (*ibid.*, 29). 'Under such circumstances', Thurman writes in a passage that Baldwin would echo years later, 'there is but a step from being despised to despising oneself' (*ibid.*, 33).

But when people who are so despised by more powerful members of their society come to believe that they are loved by 'the God of life that sustains all of nature', they may develop 'a profound sense of belonging, of counting' (*ibid.*, 38 and 39). Thurman notes that this fact about the dynamics of faith was 'drilled into me by my grandmother', who was born into slavery on a Florida plantation (*ibid.*, 39). When Thurman was a child, his grandmother told stories about 'a certain slave minister who . . . held secret religious meetings with his fellow slaves' (*ibid.*). The minister urged his congregants to reject what White people said and thought about them – 'you are not niggers . . . you are not slaves' – and to view themselves, instead, as 'God's children' (*ibid.*). When oppressed people come to see themselves in this light, they may develop and stabilize a sense of their own worth. Over time, they may stop viewing their characteristics through 'the darkened lens of those who are largely responsible for [their] social predicament', and they may come to recognize and appreciate their own 'powers, gifts, talents, and abilities' (*ibid.*, 43). Indeed, they may discover, within themselves, resources that enable them to survive their oppression, and to resist it.

#### *Thurman's theistic response (2): altering unworthy characteristics*

Later on, during a discussion of a story from the Gospel of John about Jesus's encounter with a woman accused of adultery, Thurman explains how faith in God may prompt any of us, whether or not we are oppressed, to try to alter those characteristics that we judge, on reflection, to be unworthy. According to the story, a group of men brought the accused woman to Jesus and demanded to know whether she should be stoned to death, as the prevailing religious law required.<sup>19</sup> Jesus offered the now-famous reply: 'He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone' (*ibid.*, 95). This response disarmed the accusers, turning their attention, for the moment, from the examination of the woman's behaviour to an examination of their own lives; and 'one by one, the men crept away', leaving the woman alone before Jesus (*ibid.*). I want to consider the exchange that followed.

Jesus, whom Thurman describes as a person whose traits and social circumstances rendered him 'a perfect instrument for the embodiment of [divine] ideals', asked the woman,

'Where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?'

'No man, Lord.'

'Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more.' (*ibid.*)

Jesus acknowledged plainly that the woman had acted wrongly, but he withheld hostility and contempt, and he accepted her as a person who possessed full 'dignity and worth' (*ibid.*). By adopting this attitude towards the woman, Jesus did 'the work of divine

grace'; in other words, he manifested divine love (*ibid.*). The gospel does not tell us how the woman fared after she left, but her realization that Jesus – the Lord – saw her wrongdoing and accepted her with love may well have made it easier for her to examine and assess her own behaviour honestly, giving her an opportunity to take on, in earnest, the project of altering that behaviour. In Thurman's words, Jesus 'placed a crown over [the woman's] head which for the rest of her life she would keep trying to grow tall enough to wear' (*ibid.*, 96).

### *'Larger, freer, and more loving'*

So, faith in God can enable us to cope with the danger of humiliation, and it can do so in a manner that, to return to Baldwin's challenge, renders us 'larger, freer, and more loving' (Baldwin (1998b), 314). Such faith disposes us to believe, despite reasons for doubt, that the supremely good creator of all that exists sees us as we are and loves us wholeheartedly. When we are utterly alone – estranged from people around us and even from ourselves – such faith can make us larger, enabling us to achieve a kind of cosmic reconciliation. When we cannot bear to consider those parts of ourselves that others despise, such faith can render us freer to examine ourselves with clear eyes. And when our shame leads us to lash out at those who see our flaws, such faith can render us more loving, prompting us to abandon our hostility.

This, at any rate, is what faith in God *can* accomplish. That it often fails to produce such results is, as both Thurman and Baldwin point out, evident from the lives that many American Christians lead. Furthermore, quite apart from its likelihood of success, this theistic approach to coping with the danger of humiliation is not available to those who lack faith in God and are unable or unwilling to acquire such faith. I now want to sketch, all too briefly, Baldwin's account of how we might negotiate the danger of humiliation *without* the aid of faith in God.

## **Mortal loves**

### *Baldwin's secular response (I): accepting ourselves*

In his early work, Baldwin develops a kind of secular analogue of the theistic response to the danger of humiliation, and this secular account rests not on our faith in God and our associated belief that God loves us, but rather on our recognition that certain human beings love us in certain ways. First, Baldwin argues that Black Americans' love for other Black Americans who are close to them – family members, friends, and so on – can enable the loved ones to stop viewing themselves through the distorting lens of social prejudice and to recognize their worth. Such love can, in other words, enable the loved ones to achieve or maintain self-understanding and self-esteem. Baldwin notes that Black Americans are 'born into a society which spell[s] out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you [are] a worthless human being' (Baldwin (1998b), 293). Growing up in such a society, Black boys and girls risk confronting 'the unendurable frustration of being always, everywhere inferior – until finally the cancer attacks the mind and warps it' (Baldwin (1998a), 52). These children are, in other words, vulnerable to the grave and ever-present danger of internalizing what the White world says about them, becoming deeply and irrevocably ashamed of who they are, and being 'destroyed' by this shame (Baldwin (1998b), 291).

Nevertheless, Baldwin claims, these children may be empowered to cope with this danger when people who are close to them love them, and this love serves to 'strengthen [them] against a loveless world' (*ibid.*). More precisely, when Black boys and girls, who

are told by their society that they are inferior, grasp that, say, their parents embrace them wholeheartedly and recognize their worth, this can help free them from the grip of their society's distorted perspective, and it can enable them to see themselves clearly and appreciate their own value. In this manner, Black parents, siblings, teachers, and so on 'in every generation, ever since Negroes have been here' have laboured to ensure that the Black child 'who will be despised' by his society will 'not despise himself' (Baldwin (2011a), 74).

### *Baldwin's secular response (2): altering unworthy characteristics*

Of course, Black Americans would be best able to see themselves clearly and appreciate their own value if their country did not communicate to them, relentlessly and without equivocation, that they are worthless. This leads to a second dimension of Baldwin's response to the problem of humiliation. Baldwin argues that if Black Americans exhibit a certain kind of love for White Americans, this can enable White Americans to face the disturbing reality of White racism – despite the shame that this confrontation with reality evokes – and to work towards altering that reality. On the one hand, Baldwin notes, White Americans affirm ideals according to which all human beings are free and equal, and they pride themselves on their supposed adherence to these ideals. Furthermore, these White Americans can plainly see that Black people are human beings. On the other hand, 'black men were brought here as a source of cheap labor'; they were regarded as 'indispensable to the economy' and treated 'as though they were animals' (Baldwin (1998d), 681). And White Americans have continually developed, relied on, and participated in social institutions and practices that involved the brutal subjugation of Black people. These White Americans' dim recognition that their Black compatriots are human, but systematically treated as though they are less than human, elicits a 'perpetual, hidden, festering, and entirely unadmitted' form of shame that Baldwin considers 'one of the keys to . . . the American psychology' (Baldwin (2011a), 76). It produces, in other words, 'the white man's profound desire not to be judged . . . not to be seen as he is', and it generates his need to look away from the moral condition of his society, and from his own position in that society (Baldwin (1998b), 341). Such shame leads White Americans to 'brainwash' themselves into believing that White people are essentially superior, and that Black people are, indeed, 'animals' that 'deserve to be treated like animals' (Baldwin (1998d), 681). Put another way, those Americans who believe themselves to be White respond to their shame by trying to hide, or mask, the vast discrepancy between their professed ideals and their way of life. They adopt this response – a kind of flight from the moral reality of White racism – in order to 'safeguard their purity', but, Baldwin claims, this flight has 'made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them' (Baldwin (1998c), 386).

Baldwin insists, in the face of strong and obvious reasons for doubt, that it is possible to prevent White racism from undoing American society, and to create a just, multiracial community in the United States. But, to achieve this aim, Black Americans must take on a radical burden: they must exhibit a kind of love for their White compatriots. In a section of *The Fire Next Time* that takes the form of an open letter to his nephew, Baldwin writes:

There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. (Baldwin (1998b), 293–294)

Baldwin adds that those same White Americans who deny Black people's humanity, and deny their own society's grievous crimes, 'are your brothers – your lost younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing reality and begin to change it' (*ibid.*, 294).

I do not have space to discuss in detail Baldwin's rich and illuminating account of how love might produce these results, but I will provide a rough sketch. In the passages that I just quoted, Baldwin calls on Black Americans both to bear witness to the reality and the devastating consequences of White racism and to exhibit a kind of love for White Americans. To be clear, such love is not a sentimental matter; it need not involve, say, feeling some form of affection for White Americans. Rather, it involves accepting White Americans as brothers and sisters – as deeply and dangerously misguided members of a kind of American family. When Black Americans love their White compatriots in this way, they – Black Americans – attend to this familial relationship, and in light of this relationship, they withhold hatred and contempt, and they cling to a kind of faith in the possibility of achieving communion with their wayward kin. When White Americans recognize that Black Americans see them, and see their society, with clear eyes and nevertheless love them – nevertheless accept them as brothers and sisters – this may ease their psychic pressure to mask the vast discrepancy between their professed ideals and the lives they lead. Such love, to use Baldwin's phrase, 'takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within', and it thereby creates an opening for Black Americans to lead their lost brothers and sisters to face harsh truths about themselves and about their society, and to take on the creative task of fashioning a better social world (*ibid.*, 341).<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

How do these considerations bear on the earthly significance of our concept of God? Having faith in God disposes us to believe that a supremely good God created our world, knows us and sees us as we are, and loves us without reservation; and I argued above that, because it supports those beliefs, such faith can enable us to cope with the danger of humiliation that Baldwin describes. But if Baldwin's early views, which I sketched in the previous section, are correct, then having faith in God and coming to believe that we are objects of divine love is not the only way to cope with this difficulty. We might rely, instead, on our recognition that we are objects of certain *mortal* loves.

Baldwin's understanding of the nature and the transformative potential of Black Americans' love for one another and for their White compatriots is, I believe, both timely and compelling. To be sure, some important challenges remain. For example, we may want a more detailed portrait of the kind of love Baldwin has in mind. We might worry that responding to America's racial injustice with such love would merely facilitate further wrongdoing. Or we might worry that, in general, people who are treated unjustly cannot love the perpetrators of injustice in the manner that Baldwin describes unless they rely on some more fundamental religious beliefs or commitments – the very sorts of beliefs and commitments that Baldwin purports to do without. But I cannot address these issues here. Rather, I have tried to describe the grave danger that, according to Baldwin, characterizes our social lives; to explain how faith in God might yield a satisfactory response to this danger; and to suggest that Baldwin's secular analogue of this response is well worth exploring.

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## Notes

1. In an interview in the documentary film *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin's friend and biographer David Leeming describes the challenges that scholars face when they discuss Baldwin's religious views. And Baldwin recounts responding in the following way when Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, questioned him about his religious affiliation:

I was in something of a bind, for I really could not say – could not allow myself to be stamped into saying – that I was a Christian. 'I? Now? Nothing . . . I'm a writer. I like doing things alone . . . I don't, anyway', I said finally, 'think about it a great deal.' (Baldwin (1998a), 327)

2. Baldwin (1998g), 756.

3. Baldwin (1998b) and (1998g).

4. Baldwin (2011b), 190.

5. Leeming (1994), Lebron (2017, 97–126), Cherry (2018), Gibson (2019), and Glaude (2020, 207–217) discuss various aspects of love's role in Baldwin's thought. By describing the vulnerability to shame and humiliation that, according to Baldwin, characterizes our social lives, and by explaining how divine and mortal loves might address this vulnerability, I aim to shed light on features of shame and love that are central to Baldwin's thought, but underexplored in the literature.

6. My initial characterization of shame also relies on Vida Yao's (2020) illuminating account. Like Yao, I describe ways in which our shame can estrange us from people, and I argue that being loved in certain ways may remedy this estrangement. However, Yao and I are concerned with substantially different forms of estrangement, which arise in substantially different circumstances. Furthermore, the kind of love that Yao describes involves affection for certain of the beloved's flaws, and it serves partly to enable the lover to achieve communion with a beloved whose flaws cannot be altered. By contrast, the kinds of love that I discuss earn their keep partly by enabling the beloved to change in certain respects.

7. Baldwin describes Dostoevsky as one of 'my models' (Leeming (1994), 200). There are deep connections between Baldwin's philosophy and Dostoevsky's philosophy, and these connections are rooted partly in these authors' creative uses of elements of Christianity to characterize the dynamics of shame and love and to consider how we might respond to great, unwarranted suffering.

8. I am grateful to members of a philosophy and literature reading group at MIT for enormously helpful discussion of this scene.

9. I have focused on the fact that Grushenka's desire to seduce Alyosha is rooted in her shame, but the young monk's going to Grushenka's house, despite his dim recognition that she hopes to seduce him, is also a response to humiliation. Alyosha suffers his spiritual crisis because the circumstances surrounding the death of his beloved spiritual teacher have rendered the teacher an object of widespread, unmerited ridicule. During that crisis, Alyosha – urged on by a scheming acquaintance – violates several norms that govern life in the monastery: he eats sausage, he decides to drink vodka, and he follows the acquaintance to Grushenka's house. These violations constitute a form of 'rebellion' – a lashing out in anger at God, who has permitted Alyosha's beloved teacher to be humiliated (Dostoevsky (1992), 341).

10. I discuss these examples in Preston-Roedder (2018).

11. For discussion of these aspects of faith, see Tillich (1957, ch. 2), Adams (1999, 380–389), and Preston-Roedder (2013, 2018, and *forthcoming*). Generally speaking, I will use 'faith' to refer to the particular type of faith that I just described, but there may be other, structurally distinct types of faith that play important roles in moral or religious life, or contribute to our flourishing in other ways.

12. Caring about knowing and appreciating God's attributes is also characteristic of loving God. In this respect, having faith in God and loving God are mutually reinforcing.

13. My claims about how our self-absorption and chronic distraction cloud our perception of reality rely on Iris Murdoch. Murdoch notes that 'to silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands moral discipline' (Murdoch (2009), 63). Nevertheless, she adds,

the appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just an analogy of) the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real. (*ibid.*)

My characterization of the corrective role of certain forms of openness and attention relies both on Murdoch (2009) and on Jollimore's (2011, 46–73) discussion of the epistemic partiality associated with love.



14. See Howard-Snyder (2019) and Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2022).
15. For a characterization of the distinction between belief and acceptance, see Cohen (1995). For discussion of the view that faith may sometimes prompt a person to accept, rather than believe, certain claims, see Alston (1996 and 2007), Howard-Snyder (2013), McKaughan (2013), and Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2022).
16. Of course, as William James (1956, 27) points out, people who *lack* faith and deny that God exists may turn out to be wrong. So, they risk living in ways that make fools of themselves and waste their opportunities in rather different respects.
17. See Tillich (2013).
18. For an excellent overview of Thurman's philosophical theology, see Neal (2019).
19. See John 8.
20. My discussion of Baldwin and Thurman has focused on navigating dangers posed by the destructive consequences of certain already widespread forms of shame. There is also a tradition within Black American moral and political philosophy that aims to throw America's injustice into stark relief in order to *elicit* Americans' shame and harness the ameliorative potential of that shame. See, for example, Douglass (1950) and King (2005).

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