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“Do Not Blame Me”: James Baldwin on White Christian Guilt and Racial Repentance

Celeste LaFollette

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“Do Not Blame Me”: James Baldwin on White Christian Guilt and Racial Repentance

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James Baldwin, a Black American writer, contends that the root cause of America’s racial problem is not necessarily prejudice or hatred but guilt. In his essay, “White Man’s Guilt,” Baldwin says that most of the arguments white people use today against the reality of America’s racial problem can be reduced to a plea: “Do not blame me. I was not there. I did not do it” (*Price* 411). In many of his essays, Baldwin explores white America’s long history of guilt, denial, and justification, and he explains that many white Christians—in an attempt to avoid blame and protect their power, their privilege, and their identity as good, innocent, moral people—have perpetrated immense trauma against Black people. Since the time of slavery, white Christians have created a variety of theological justifications for racial inequality, and these justifications generally shift blame to Black people and to God. “Now, this is not called morality,” proclaims Baldwin, “this is not called faith, this has nothing to do with Christ. It has to do with power, and part of the dilemma of the Christian Church is the fact that it opted...for power and betrayed its own first principles” (*Price* 438). Contemporary research in the field of race and religion has shown that racism—and the denial of it—is often worse in white Christian communities today. A close examination of how and why white Christians have participated in racism demonstrates that racism is more than a few isolated incidents of “bad” people engaging in individual acts of prejudice, hatred, or violence. In this thesis, I will put Baldwin’s observations and insights about white people and white Christians in conversation with other scholars of white Christian ideology to demonstrate that racism is a widespread moral sin rooted in guilt and the attempt to avoid blame, maintain power, and protect identity. I will argue that preaching love, forgiveness, and unity often misses the mark, and that Baldwin’s solution of repentance offers a more effective approach in helping white Christians to combat racism today.

Keywords: white Christian guilt, James Baldwin, racial repentance, blame, racism

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Introduction

In many of his essays, the Black American writer James Baldwin explores white America's long history of guilt, denial, and justification when it comes to racism, and he gives particular attention to the justifications of white Christians. In 1968, Baldwin gave an address to the World Council of Churches during which he said, "The most serious thing that has happened in the world today and in the Christian conscience is that Christians, having rationalized their crimes for so long, though they live with them every day and see evidence of them every day, put themselves out of touch with themselves" (*Price* 440). He discerned that the real issue was not just the crimes white people committed against Black people but also their denial of those crimes—a denial that springs from the internal conflict they experience when they realize their choices are at odds with their values. In an essay titled "The White Problem," Baldwin explains, "I'm not talking about the crime; I'm talking about denying what one does. This is a much more sinister matter" (*Cross* 75). Slavery was white America's original sin, but denial of this crime has led white people to invent justifications which have produced racial prejudice. This denial and justification, then, (rather than the original crime of slavery) is Baldwin's primary focus.

Baldwin is not the only writer to explore the theme of racial abuse perpetrated by white Christians; Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., James H. Cone, and others have testified to the hypocrisy of white Christians, as well. For instance, in his autobiography, Frederick Douglass says, "Of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly of all others" (*Autobiographies* 21). Douglass saw a wide difference "between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ" and was never satisfied with those theories which "made God responsible for slavery" (*Autobiographies* 28, 105). In his

speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?,” Douglass further explains, “The church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors...The sin of which it is guilty is one of omission as well as of commission” (*Speeches* 79, 81). Far from being strong supporters of freedom, justice, and equality, most white Christians have been either silent enablers or active participants in racial oppression.

These writers assert that white Christians have been slow to label racism as a moral sin worthy of their full attention. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” for example, Dr. King says, “I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership.” He laments that too often “the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound.” He says that rather than being disturbed by the presence of the church, “the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.” Dr. King states that he has heard many ministers say, “Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern,” and he has watched as young peoples’ “disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.” Christian churches lose moral authority when they remain silent in the face of sin. As Dr. King declares, “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people” (King, “Letter”). Some white Christians courageously challenged racial oppression through the anti-slavery movement and the civil rights movement; many more did not. From slavery to today, many white Christians have tried to claim innocent neutrality over racial abuse, but Black leaders like Douglass, King, and Baldwin knew that this idea was merely another way to avoid responsibility.

Contemporary research in the field of race and religion has shown that racism—and the denial of it—is often worse in white Christian communities. Robert P. Jones, author of *White*

Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity (2020) and founder of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), reports that, “in public opinion polls, a clear pattern has emerged: white Christians are consistently more likely than whites who are religiously unaffiliated to deny the existence of structural racism” (Jones, “Racism Among White Christians”). Jones reports that white Christians today often see racism as a few isolated incidents of individual prejudice or hatred rather than a long history of collective and systemic abuse resulting in widespread repercussions today. While most white Christians outwardly condemn racism, many hold racist views privately—usually without fully realizing that their views are, in fact, racist. When they think of racists who need to repent, they do not think of themselves. This widespread ignorance stems from denials and justifications that have been deeply embedded in the practice of Christianity since the time of slavery.

To Baldwin, America’s racial problem has always been a moral crisis rooted in guilt and justification—a dispute between those who want to deny and justify sin and those who want to fight against it. In his essay, “White Man’s Guilt,” Baldwin argues that most of the arguments white people make against the reality of America’s racial problem can be reduced to a plea: “Do not blame me. I was not there. I did not do it” (*Price* 411). As many Black scholars have described, many white people tend to respond inappropriately to racism—often by recycling the same arguments that slaveholders and segregationists used in the past to defend themselves. In *The Color of Compromise*, for example, Jemar Tisby offers several specific examples of the kinds of arguments many white Christians use today:

Critics will assert that the ideas in *The Color of Compromise* should be disregarded because they are too “liberal.” They will claim that a Marxist Communist ideology underlies all the talk about racial equality. They will contend that such an extended

discussion of racism reduces Black people to a state of helplessness and a “victim mentality.” They will try to point to counter examples and say that racists do not represent the “real” American church. They will assert that the historical facts are wrong or have been misinterpreted. They will charge that this discussion of race is somehow “abandoning the gospel” and replacing it with problematic calls for “social justice” (Tisby 21).

As Tisby explains, these arguments are not new or original; they are ubiquitous throughout history. He states, “The same arguments that perpetuated racial inequality in decades past get recycled in the present day... These arguments have been used throughout the American church’s history to deny or defend racism” (21). Baldwin says, “Leaving aside all the physical facts that one could quote, leaving aside rape or murder, leaving aside the bloody catalogue of oppression, which we are, in one way, too familiar with already, what this does to the subjugated is to destroy his sense of reality” (*Price* 404). Baldwin laments that many white people “are not prepared to believe my version of the story, to believe that it happened.” In order to avoid believing that, he explains, “they have set up in themselves a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications” and this system is about to “destroy their grasp of reality, which is another way of saying their moral sense” (*Cross* 77). Most white arguments against the reality of systemic racism are really an elaborate attempt to avoid blame, and this attempt is destroying the moral sense of many white Christians.

The issues of guilt, justification, denial, blame, and power are, of course, human struggles that can affect anyone of any racial or religious identity. But for the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the specific challenges of one particular group: white Christians. I use the term *white* to refer to those who are light skinned and who benefit from light-skinned

privileges. Historically, whiteness has been more of a status than a skin color, a status attached to a variety of social, political, and economic advantages which certain groups could earn over time through assimilation. I use the term *Christian* to describe those who belong to a Christian denomination and to those who profess to believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Obviously, not all white Christians are individually guilty of using racist ideas and arguments. Any discussion of a problem that occurs at both an individual level and a collective level is challenging, and it can be especially difficult to find a way of discussing problematic ideology without negatively labeling an entire group of people. However, a close examination of how and why white Christians have participated in racism demonstrates that racism is more than a few isolated incidents of “bad” people engaging in individual acts of prejudice, hatred, or violence. The problem of racism in Christianity cannot be reduced to a single racist individual or a single denomination (Southern evangelicals, for example) or to one of its more extreme manifestations (the KKK or Christian nationalism, for example). In this thesis, I will put Baldwin’s observations and insights about white people and white Christians in conversation with other scholars of white Christian ideology to demonstrate that racism is a widespread moral sin rooted in guilt and the attempt to avoid blame, maintain power, and protect identity. I will argue that preaching love, forgiveness, and unity often misses the mark, and that Baldwin’s solution of repentance may offer a more effective approach in helping white Christians to combat racism today.

I. White Christian Guilt

James Baldwin’s essays contend that white Christian ideas on race have played a significant role in perpetuating racial abuse. In his essay, “Down at the Cross,” Baldwin states, “I knew that, according to many Christians, I was a descendent of Ham, who had been cursed, and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave. This had nothing to do with anything I was, or

contained, or could become; my fate had been sealed forever from the beginning of time” (*Price* 347). He further laments, “If one despairs...of human love, God’s love alone is left. But God...is white. And if his love is so great, and if he loved all his children, why were we, the Blacks, cast down so far?” (Baldwin, *Price* 344). In a racist world that many white Christians have helped to create, Baldwin and other Black Americans have been forced to wrestle with a narrative that casts them as intrinsically and perpetually unworthy, inferior souls forever at the mercy of an uncaring God, a God who supposedly made them—but not in his image, a God who, in fact, closely resembles their oppressors.

Baldwin’s work illustrates the painful complexity of the Black American experience with white Christianity, and his personal experience illuminates the ways in which white Christians, generally speaking, have betrayed Black people. He states, “Negroes in this country...are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world” (Baldwin, *Price* 342). Baldwin echoes a similar idea in his essay “White Racism or World Community,” where he describes watching what the Christian church did to his father, how it had the power to “destroy Black minds” (439). In “Letter to My Nephew,” Baldwin discloses that his father “was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him” (333). Baldwin confesses, “It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I’d been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on the earth as though I had a right to be here” (*Price* 227). Baldwin knew what it meant to be hated, and he had learned this from people professing to be Christians. Baldwin scholar Joseph Vogel writes, “For Baldwin, speaking in general terms, white Christianity in America, by and large, spoke from a position of power; Black Christianity from a position of struggle, resistance, and survival” (Vogel “To Crush”). Vogel explains that while Black and white Christians have, theoretically,

worshipped the same God and worked with the same texts and stories, they have been shaped by different histories. Baldwin addresses his audience “as one of the creatures, one of God’s creatures, whom the Christian Church has most betrayed,” but he reminds them that “in the heart of the absolutely necessary accusation there is contained a plea” (435). Baldwin writes from a place of exile—exile from his country and from the Christian church, and his testimony stands as a witness against the hypocrisy of white Christians.

Baldwin makes it clear that white Christians were not innocent victims unwittingly infected by the sin of racism from outside influences; they played an active role in creating racist ideology. As a junior minister in the Black Pentecostal church, Baldwin gradually came to question white interpretations of the Bible that served to justify slavery, segregation, and racial inequality. For instance, in “Down at the Cross,” Baldwin reveals that, over his years as a junior minister, he was forced, reluctantly, to realize “that the Bible itself had been written by men, and translated by men out of languages I could not read” (*Price* 346-47). He explains, “Of course, I had the rebuttal ready: These men had all been operating under divine inspiration. *Had they? All of them?*” (Baldwin, *Price* 346). Baldwin scholar Douglas Field says that Baldwin’s “former life as a boy preacher helped him to see just how intertwined Christianity was with social power in the United States and how it shaped citizens’ view of each other and the broader world” (Field 63). White Christians have used a variety of Biblical arguments to justify slavery, including the following: Old Testament prophets owned slaves, the Ten Commandments mention slavery twice, God sanctioned and ordained the practice of slavery, Christ never condemned Roman slavery during his earthly ministry, the apostle Paul urges slaves to obey their masters and even returned Philemon, a runaway slave, to his master, and the curse of Ham or Cain condemns Black people to be servants.¹ Historically, many white Christians have used the Bible as a tool of

manipulation in their effort to keep Black people submissive and subservient. Therefore, Baldwin must question their claims to divine inspiration.

Baldwin's warnings about the weaponization of the Bible to maintain control over Black people are evidenced by a special exhibit that opened in 2018 at the Museum of the Bible. This exhibit centered on a rare Bible from the 1800s that was used by British missionaries to convert and educate slaves. White proponents of slavery edited this version of the Bible to exclude any portion of text that might inspire rebellion or liberation among enslaved people (including the story in Exodus of the Israelites escaping from bondage). One passage they removed was Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." One verse they retained was Ephesians 6:5: "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ" (Martin "Slave Bible"). In her book *White Evangelical Racism*, Anthea Butler explains that in situations where slaves were prohibited from reading, "preachers simply omitted talking about scriptures that emphasized freedom" (Butler 18).

Before and during Baldwin's time, many white Christians created their own unique theological justifications—usually by shifting blame either to God or to Black people. For example, in 1871, J. L. Reynolds told South Carolina Baptists that the Southern Baptist Convention had "never receded" from its views on slavery, and that it had "no confession to make" and "no repentance to offer" for those views. "This convention may not have done its whole duty to the slave," Reynolds says, "but, in its recognition of him as a bondsman, it holds itself to have been in accord with the teachings of the New Testament, and therefore guiltless in the sight of God" (Smith 211). Likewise, in a 1960 Sunday sermon called "Is Segregation

Scriptural?”, Bob Jones, Sr., a popular Christian evangelist, argued that “God is the author of segregation” (Jones “Is Segregation Scriptural?”). Many white Christians have tried to explain racial inequality by inventing theories to justify it. These theories have rarely, if ever, suggested that white people might be doing something wrong; they have exclusively centered on notions of Black inferiority and divine inspiration, making God the author of slavery, segregation, and racial inequality.

Baldwin contends that America’s racial problem began long ago with denial and justification. In his essay “White Racism or World Community,” Baldwin says, “Very long ago, for a complex of reasons, but among them power, the Christian personality split itself in two, split itself into dark and light, in fact, and it is now bewildered, at war with itself, is literally unable to comprehend” (*Price* 440). Guilt over the abuses of slavery led white Christians into a war of conscience. Rather than resolving their guilt through Christian repentance, many white Christians justified their sins by inventing false beliefs of Black inferiority. As Baldwin says, “Black men were brought here as a source of cheap labor...In order to justify the fact that men were treated as though they were animals, the white republic had to brainwash itself into believing that they were, indeed, animals and deserved to be treated like animals” (328). Baldwin explains that slavery was not an accident, or an act of God, or some sort of innocent mistake committed by well-meaning people who didn’t understand what they were doing. Slavery was driven by a desire for power, privilege, and wealth; racist ideas and arguments came afterward to justify the abuse of Black people in that pursuit.

As Baldwin describes, early on in slavery, the Christian church had to conspire with itself to say that Black people deserved their condition of servitude and were happy in their place, and Baldwin argues that this choice put Christians completely at odds with the teachings of Christ.

Many white Christians said Black people were animalistic, savage, heathen, uncivilized, dangerous, dishonest, criminal, cursed by God, unworthy, child-like and dependent, unable to rule or govern themselves, lazy, unintelligent, sexually promiscuous, physically ugly, strange, different, and so forth. “Now, this is not called morality,” proclaims Baldwin, “this is not called faith, this has nothing to do with Christ. It has to do with power, and part of the dilemma of the Christian Church is the fact that it opted...for power and betrayed its own first principles” (*Price* 438). The Christian Church—which preached love of one’s neighbor—had to distort, corrupt, and dilute its theology in order to make slavery (and, later, segregation) compatible with Christian teachings.

In her book *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Joy DeGruy explores the origin of America’s racial problem through the lens of cognitive dissonance. She says, “The greater the difference between our actions and self-perception, the greater the cognitive dissonance.” People do not like the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, she explains, so they will try to resolve their discomfort by either owning up to the negative act or by justifying it. DeGruy says the idea that “they deserved it” is a typical justification, and in cases of extreme harm, such as slavery, the perpetrators must go so far as to dehumanize and demonize their victims in order to resolve their immense cognitive dissonance. She explains the cognitive dissonance experienced by many white European Christians in the following way:

During the past 500 years, Europeans have spent significant resources to prove that Africans and those of African descent are inferior. The difference between the actions of the Europeans (i.e. enslaving, raping, and killing) and their beliefs about themselves (i.e. “We are good Christians”) was so great and the cognitive dissonance so painful that they were obliged to go to great lengths in order to survive their own horrific behavior. Chattel

slavery and genocide were so un-Christian that the only way they could make their actions acceptable, and so resolve the dissonance, was to relegate their victims to a subhuman level (DeGruy 38).

The gap between white Christian behavior in regards to slavery, lynching, segregation, and discrimination and white Christians' view of themselves as God's holy and chosen people, "a city that is set on a hill," and the voice of moral authority to a wicked world is greater than the gap for those who do not hold such a lofty view of themselves; therefore, white Christians have had to make greater justifications—and cling to them more strongly—to avoid upsetting their high concept of who they are.

Baldwin argues that many white Christians chose justification rather than repentance because justification would allow them to protect their identity as good, moral, freedom-loving people without having to relinquish their power and privilege. As Baldwin says, "The nature of the lies the Christian Church has always helplessly told about me are only a reflection of the lies the Christian Church has always helplessly told itself, to itself, about itself" (*Price* 440). By denying their sins and shifting the blame to Black people, white people could maintain both their perception of innocence *and* their power. But in the process of shifting blame, Baldwin asserts, "Sin has merely been added to sin, and guilt piled upon guilt" (*Price* 477). In their attempt to avoid blame and protect their identity, many white Christians have perpetuated the cycle of racial abuse.

The racist ideas and arguments of white Christians today continue to center on avoiding blame. Drawing on data from a variety of public surveys, the authors of *Divided by Faith* say that when it comes to explaining the Black-white socioeconomic gap (e.g. inequality in income, jobs, and housing), the top reason cited by 72 percent of white evangelicals is "Black culture,"

“lack of motivation,” or both (Emerson 99). Jones and the PRRI found similar answers when they conducted a survey of evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics and found that more than six in ten white Christians overall—including 67 percent of white evangelicals, 62 percent of white mainline Protestants, and 57 percent of white Catholics—*disagree* with this basic statement: “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class” (Jones 162). Additionally, researchers found that two-thirds of participants agree that Black Americans should be able to overcome prejudice and “work their way up without any special favors” (161). Researchers also discovered that more than three-quarters of white Christians overall—including 83 percent of white evangelicals, 71 percent of white mainline Protestants, and 75 percent of white Catholics—believe that racial minorities use racism as an excuse for economic inequalities more than they should (161). Rather than citing systemic racism as an underlying cause of economic inequality, the majority of white Christians appear to take systemic racism (i.e. the collective beliefs, behaviors, and policies of white people past and present) out of the equation entirely and choose instead to continue the narrative begun by their forefathers that there must be something wrong (i.e. inferior) with Black leaders, Black culture, and Black communities.

Furthermore, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of white Christians—including 71 percent of white evangelicals, 59 percent of white mainline Protestants, and 63 percent of white Catholics—believe the killings of African-American men by police are isolated incidents rather than part of a broader pattern of how police treat African Americans (Jones 160). And more than eight in ten white Christians—including 86 percent of white evangelical Protestants, 70 percent of white mainline Protestants, and 70 percent of white Catholics—say that Confederate monuments are more a symbol of Southern pride than of racism (159). The PRRI reports that

white Christians overall register higher scores on the Racism Index than white religiously unaffiliated Americans (169). And this relationship holds true even when researchers rule out other factors like education, region, gender, age, household income, home ownership, living in a metropolitan area, and frequency of church attendance. The PRRI found a positive relationship between racist attitudes and white Christian identity among both frequent (weekly or more) and infrequent (seldom or never) church attenders, meaning that attending church more frequently does not make white Christians less racist; if anything, the opposite is true (184). Jones concludes from his research that “white Christians think of themselves as people who hold warm feelings toward African Americans while simultaneously embracing a host of racist and racially resentful attitudes that are inconsistent with those warm feelings” (183). It would appear that many white Christians today prefer to continue the narrative Baldwin’s work repeatedly challenges: *white people are innocent so Black people must be guilty*.

In *Taking America Back for God*, researchers Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry argue that the problem is not necessarily with the Christian religion itself or with any one denomination but with Christian nationalism, a particular set of cultural and political ideologies that has permeated many Christian churches across the country. Drawing on interviews and quantitative data from a variety of surveys, including the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey and the 2014 General Social Survey, the authors report that, according to the Christian nationalism scale they created, 19.8 percent of all Americans qualify as Ambassadors of Christian nationalism and 32.1 percent qualify as Accommodators of Christian nationalism. Among Ambassadors of Christian nationalism, 54.9 percent identify as evangelical Protestants, 11.3 percent identify as mainline Protestants, and 18.6 percent identify as Catholic. Among Accommodators of Christian nationalism, 33 percent identify as Evangelical Protestants, 12.5 percent identify as mainline

Protestants, and 31.9 percent identify as Catholic (Whitehead 27). The researchers report that “Ambassadors and Accommodators are much more likely than Resisters and Rejecters to believe that police treat Blacks the same as whites, and that police officers in the United States shoot Blacks more often because Blacks are more violent than whites” (Whitehead 104). The authors point to Franklin Graham as just one example of this tendency among Christian nationalists to shift blame to Black people. In 2015, Franklin Graham, president and CEO of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, posted the following on his Facebook page:

Listen up—Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and everybody else. Most police shootings can be avoided. It comes down to respect for authority and obedience. If a police officer tells you to stop, you stop. If a police officer tells you to put your hands in the air, you put your hands in the air. If a police officer tells you to lay down face first with your hands behind your back, you lay down face first with your hands behind your back. It’s as simple as that. Even if you think the police officer is wrong—YOU OBEY . . . Some of the unnecessary shootings we have seen recently might have been avoided. The Bible says to submit to your leaders and those in authority “because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account” (Whitehead 103).

The authors conclude that “Americans who embrace Christian nationalism are more likely to disregard racial inequality in policing and place the blame for police violence squarely on the victims” (Whitehead 104). According to Whitehead and Perry, in contrast to traditional Christian theology, white Christian nationalism does not encourage high moral standards like love, justice, and sacrifice. Christian nationalism is not about Christian principles; it’s about preserving Christian power and protecting Christian identity in response to a perceived threat—even at the expense of Christian principles.

Many white people today insist that people should tell their own story, and the story of America, in the most positive way possible—highlighting strengths, achievements, and progress more than moral failings—even as they portray Black people in the most negative way possible, citing stories and statistics on crime, drugs, absent fathers, teen pregnancy, welfare dependency, and school dropouts. For example, in 2012, after the murder of Trayvon Martin, Richard Land, (who, ironically, had served as one of the chief architects of a 1995 resolution by the Southern Baptists apologizing for their role in supporting slavery and racism) said on his radio show that people are justified in seeing a young Black man as threatening because a Black man “is statistically more likely to do you harm than a white man.”² Furthermore, Land condemned the response of Black leaders to Trayvon Martin’s death as “shameful.” He accused Barack Obama of pouring “gasoline on the racialist fires” and accused civil rights activists of using Trayvon Martin’s death to “gin up the Black vote” for Obama’s re-election (Loller “Baptist Leader”). Land defends the group with whom he most identifies (in this case, racist white people who see Black men as a threat) and shifts blame to the group with whom he least identifies (Black leaders and young Black men).

Baldwin explains that racism creates its own self-fulfilling prophecy, a terrible cycle where its consequences—for example, concentrated poverty, crime, and teen pregnancy—can be used as “proof” of racist ideas: Black people are lazy, criminal, sexually promiscuous, less committed to strong families, and so forth. In *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin says, “It is not to be wondered at...that the violent distractions of puberty, occurring in such a cage, annually take their toll, sending female children into the maternity wards and male children into the streets...They become the menial or the criminal or the shiftless, the Negroes whom segregation has produced and whom the South uses to prove that segregation is right” (*Price* 188). Likewise,

Nikole Hannah-Jones says, “It is common, still, to point to rates of Black poverty, out-of-wedlock births, crime and college attendance, as if these conditions in a country built on a racial caste system are not utterly predictable” (“Our Democracy”). Many white people use “problems in the Black community” to shift attention away from problems in the white community (e.g. prejudice, bias, power, privilege, pride, and so forth). To put it in terms of Christian theology, many white people point out the “mote” in Black communities and miss the “beam” in their own eye (*King James Bible*, Matthew 7.3). Rather than ask, *Lord, is it I?*, as Christ’s disciples once asked, they essentially ask, *Lord, is it Black people?* (Matthew 26.22).

Baldwin explains that, following the Civil War, white Americans created a story about themselves and their history that would protect their identity, their innocence, and their power. As Baldwin argues, this “invented past” erased abusive behavior, idolized the heroism and goodness of white people, taught that Black people had contributed nothing to civilization, and perpetuated the myth of racial inequality in the collective white memory (*Price* 368). In his 1866 book *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates*, Edward Pollard argues that, even though they lost the war, white Southerners can continue fighting a “war of ideas” where they can tell their history in a way that favors them, even as they pass along the idea of Black inferiority to the next generation (*Lost Cause* 750). In his 1868 book *The Lost Cause Regained*, Pollard says, “The value of the fact of the Negro’s inferiority is very great...It is from this inferiority that we deduce all the benefits of slavery in the past. It is from this inferiority that we draw all our arguments with respect to future experiments on the Negro. The fact is important as a supreme instruction for the future” (*Regained* 113-18). In other words, he argues that the idea of Black inferiority is useful to white people; it helps them justify what they did in the past and it can also help them to retain their identity in the future, meaning that ideas

about Black inferiority can be used to help white people avoid guilt and protect their power and their identity.

Likewise, in his essay “Faulkner and Desegregation,” Baldwin argues that white Southerners cling to a version of history that protects their identity. He says, “The Southerner clings to two entirely antithetical doctrines, two legends, two histories” (*Price* 150). In one story, the white Southerner is a proud, brave defender of freedom in a righteous struggle against tyrannical Northern aggression, and in the other story, he is a brutal oppressor. “The South,” Baldwin contends, “was left with only one means of asserting its identity and that means was the Negro” (151). In *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause*, Charles Reagan Wilson explores the deep, interconnected relationship between the Lost Cause narrative and Confederate Christianity. He explains that Southerners did not give up their belief that they were God’s holy and chosen people, even after losing the war. “Southerners thus retained their pride,” he says. “They believed that God would bring good out of triumphant evil: the new good would be a purer, more holy, chosen people prepared to face a special destiny” (Wilson 77). Many Southern white Christians have chosen to remember their history in a way that protects their identity, even when it forces them to lie, distort the truth, and contradict themselves—even when it costs them their integrity.

Following the civil rights movement, Baldwin watched as white Americans experienced yet another collective forgetting of racial abuse as they chose to cling to a dream of blameless innocence instead, a fantasy of themselves and their past. Baldwin argues that white Americans are very carefully and deliberately conditioned to believe in the fantasy of their innocence “by their politicians, by the news they get and the way they read it, by the movies, and the television screen, and by every aspect of the popular culture.” He says, “The brainwashing is so thorough

that blunt, brutal reality stands not a chance against it” (Baldwin, *Price* 533). This brainwashing, Baldwin argues, leaves white Americans trapped in a history they do not understand, reduced to ignorance and incoherent stammering about the racial abuse of the past.

Baldwin believes that many white people cling to denial and self-defense because they fear the loss of their identity. In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin states, “White America remains unable to believe that Black America’s grievances are real...because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country” (*Price* 536). Baldwin refers to himself and other Black people as a “disagreeable mirror,” one that reflects back to white people a history they would rather not see. As Baldwin observes, “Only a creature despised by history finds history a questionable matter” (*Price* 410). To Baldwin, history is not in the past; it is something we carry with us in the present. “It is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations,” he says. “One wishes that Americans—white Americans—would read, for their own sakes, this record and stop defending themselves against it” (Baldwin, *Price* 410). People tend to defend, empathize with, and support the individuals, groups, and institutions with whom they most identify (even when they know they are guilty of wrongdoing), and, conversely, blame those with whom they least identify (even when they know they have been wronged in some way). Too often, when white Christians are presented with evidence of racial prejudice—in themselves, their friends, their family members, their church, their church leaders, their workplace, their political party, their favorite political leaders, their history, the police, the Confederacy, the Founding Fathers, or America in general—they take a defensive posture as they try to protect the individuals, groups, and institutions with whom they most identify. But in siding with the guilty party, they risk alienating Black people. Whether they intend to cause harm

or not, their defensive response sends the message that they do not identify with Black people and will not support their struggle for freedom and justice.

Baldwin explains that fear of blame often leads white people to respond to racism with denial and self-defense rather than love, support, and validation for Black people's racial experiences. In his essay, "White Man's Guilt," Baldwin says, "To have to deal with such people can be unutterably exhausting for they, with a really dazzling ingenuity, a tireless agility, are perpetually defending themselves against charges which one...has not really, for the moment, made" (*Price* 410). In discussions on race, many white people can become so hypersensitive to guilt that they start defending themselves before they have even been accused of any wrongdoing. As DeGruy explains, "African Americans are repeatedly asked to reveal proof of the realities of racism to skeptical white people. They reluctantly explain the countless incidents of discrimination, and even assaults, directed at them and those they love" (DeGruy 16). In response, DeGruy says, some whites "cite the election of President Barack Obama as evidence that racism has ended. More often than not, the response of the questioner is denial and disbelief, while the Black person, having reopened wounds, is left frustrated and reinjured" (DeGruy 16). Likewise, in her book *Me and White Supremacy*, Layla Saad says, "Rather than allowing yourself to really hear what they are going through and ask with empathy and compassion how you can support them, you minimize their experiences and let them know, without saying it, that you are not a safe white person for them to be around" (Saad 44). Self-defense—with its inherent focus on *self*—usually impedes empathy and support for others, and this toxic response can ultimately block any chance of real racial reconciliation.

Baldwin asserts that there is an important difference between guilt and responsibility. In "Words of a Native Son," he says, "I'm not interested in anybody's guilt. Guilt is a luxury that

we can no longer afford. I know you didn't do it, and I didn't do it either, but I am responsible for it because I am a man and a citizen of this country and you are responsible for it, too, for the very same reason" (*Price* 400). Baldwin argues that we must address America's racial problem for the sake of our children and the future that they will face if we don't. White Christians today are not guilty for the sins of their fathers, but all Americans are responsible for cleaning up the mess America's forefathers made—for the simple reason that, if they don't, it will pass on to the next generation. Far too often, white people get tangled up in the question of who is at fault, and they fail to ask the more important question of what they can do to address the problem. Their attempt to avoid blame becomes a major stumbling block toward racial progress.

Baldwin says that, in their perpetual attempt to argue, shift blame, and avoid consequences, many white people remind him of children who have never been forced to grow up. In *No Name in the Street*, he explains that white Americans cling to a dream of innocence for reasons that involve American self-love on some "deep, disastrously adolescent level" (*Price* 533). In "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," he says, "for a very long time the troubles of white people failed to impress me as being real trouble. They put me in mind of children crying because the breast has been taken away" (290). Willful ignorance about past and present racial abuse keeps white people trapped in a state of perpetual immaturity where they refuse to develop eyes to see and ears to hear the pain of Black people—a pain which could challenge and change some of their deeply held beliefs about themselves, their priorities, and their behavior. In other words, white peoples' attempt to avoid blame inhibits their own growth.

Baldwin argues that the moral cost of clinging to false innocence is high. In "Stranger in the Village," he says, "People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead

turns himself into a monster” (*Price* 89). Similarly, in *No Name in the Street*, he says that the so-called Negro problem, “which white people invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them; and this not from anything Blacks may or may not be doing but because of the role a guilty and constricted white imagination has assigned to the Blacks” (*Price* 477). From slavery to today, this issue has never been a “Negro problem.” It has always been an internal war between white people and themselves—an internal war with devastating external consequences. In his essay, “White Racism or World Community,” Baldwin warns his Christian audience that without repentance, the church will be in great danger “not merely because the Black people say it is but because people are always in great danger when they know what they should do and refuse to act on that knowledge” (438). Taking on a white persona, he further states, “Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his” (Baldwin, *Price* 66). In other words, the true cost of racism to white Christians is found in how it disfigures them morally and places them at odds with their own professed values. From denial and justification of sin to hostile, defensive arguments to violence, racism brings out the worst in those who accept its ideas—consciously or unconsciously.

Baldwin contends that blame and identity have been at the center of this battle from the beginning. In his essay “Stranger in the Village,” Baldwin maintains that in this long battle “the white man’s motive was the protection of his identity; the Black man was motivated by the need to establish an identity” (*Price* 88). Baldwin’s essays are an attempt to explore the trauma of his past, tell the truth about it, and then create a new identity for himself, an identity not defined by the racist lies invented by white people. He seeks to create an identity as a full human being and “not as a creation of the Christian conscience” (Baldwin, *Price* 439). And in this endeavor,

Baldwin invites white readers to follow him on this journey, to examine the past more deeply and then create a new identity for themselves too. In that sense, the goal is not to erase or re-write history; the goal is to expand history, to tell white Christian history in a way that deeply and honestly examines the racially traumatic parts of the story and ultimately allows people to adopt a narrative that is more conducive to repentance.

II. Racial Repentance

In the introduction to *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin offers his solution to the problem of white Christian guilt: go back to the beginning, travel our road again and tell the truth about it, do our first works over and choose repentance this time rather than justification and denial. In other words, he urges us to begin anew, to be born again. He states, “If I were still in the pulpit, which some people (and they may be right) claim I never left, I would counsel my countrymen to the self-confrontation of prayer, the cleansing breaking of the heart which precedes atonement” (Baldwin, *Price* Introduction). Racism is a vicious blame game. Most white arguments against the reality of America’s racial problem can be summed up in a few short sentences: *Don’t blame me or anyone with whom I identify. It’s not my fault. I’m not bad. I’m innocent.* For example, in an attempt to play the victim and defend their innocence, some white people today say that white people are now the real victims of discrimination, that their rights are being abrogated, that they are stigmatized if they express pride in their own race or heritage, that they are being psychologically affected and losing self-esteem, and that the end product of all this is the elimination of the white race (Berbrier, “The Victim Ideology”). In a 2011 nation-wide survey of 208 Black people and 209 white people, Tufts University found that many whites believe that anti-white racism (what they call “reverse racism”) has increased and is now a bigger problem than anti-Black racism (Norton “Whites See Racism”). But this argument is not new; Baldwin

notes that segregationists used the same argument during the civil rights movement to defend themselves by shifting the blame to Black leaders like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael (*Price* 438, 497). And this tendency to shift blame to Black people is why Baldwin advocates Christian repentance, a change of heart and mind. Human beings need a way to deal with guilt that doesn't hurt others—a way to accept blame and still protect their identities as good, valuable people. Baldwin knows from his own experience—from his own identity crisis—that the stakes are high when one's identity is on the line. So, despite his alienation from the Christian church and despite his understandable disillusionment with the behavior of many white Christians, Baldwin is still calling white Christians to repentance even in his final essays.

Assuming that racism is rooted in individual/interpersonal prejudice, hatred, and discrimination, many white Christians have tried to address racism by focusing on messages of love, unity, equality, and reconciliation as a solution. In 1954, Reverend Billy Graham, for example, a prominent evangelical leader and ordained Southern Baptist minister, said, “I believe the heart of the problem of race is in loving our neighbor” (Tisby 134). The authors of *Divided by Faith* found similar answers from the many white Christians they interviewed across the country. One Baptist woman summarized the race problem in this way: “We don't love our neighbors as ourselves. That is the primary commandment of the Bible, to love our neighbor as ourself” (Emerson 78). A Presbyterian woman said, “All people are created equal, and we are all equal in God's image. No one is inferior or superior...I think if people just understood that one basic truth, there wouldn't be a lot of the [race] problems we have” (Emerson 118). A woman from the Northeast who is a member of a Congregational church said, “If you're a Christian, you're going to accept other people. Never mind what color or race, you're going to accept them as equal” (Emerson 117). The researchers found that the most common terms white Christians

used to describe the race problem were prejudice, bigotry, anger, ignorance, lack of respect, fear of each other, poor communication, individuals hating or being angry at each other, and lacking Christlike love for one another (Emerson 75). Most of the white Christians surveyed did not cite guilt, the attempt to avoid blame, or the attempt to protect their identity as an underlying cause. And when asked to provide specific, concrete examples of what racism looks like today, they could not provide any.

Moral messages that urge Christians to love everyone, treat everyone as a child of God, embrace diversity, seek unity, and avoid contentious division reflect traditional Christian values; however, these messages often miss the mark because they don't address the underlying problem: *many white people are avoiding blame and fighting to protect their power and their identity in a way that harms other people*. This response is most likely based in fear, bias, ignorance, selfishness, immaturity, pride, and a severe lack of empathy for the racial experiences of Black people—not necessarily hatred (though this kind of response can certainly look and feel hateful). Vague, generic, and overly simplistic appeals to “love others” and “be one” do not usually work well. In “The Crusade of Indignation,” Baldwin declares, “It is easy to proclaim all souls equal in the sight of God; it is hard to make men equal on earth, in the sight of men” (*Price* 158). He further explains, “Indignation and goodwill are not enough to make the world better. Clarity is needed, as well as charity” (Baldwin, *Price* 156). Discussions about inclusion and belonging that are disconnected from our long history of exclusion and alienation are not specific enough to prompt the sincere change of heart and mind that would lead to individual and systemic change. White Christians cannot “weep with those that weep” and “bear one another’s burdens” if they remain ignorantly unaware of what those burdens are specifically (Romans 12:15; Galatians 6:12). White Christians need clear, in-depth, and specific correction. In other

words, a call to repentance might work better because the doctrine of repentance usually includes a process of confession, forsaking sin, and a sincere attempt to make amends for past and present harm.

Baldwin makes it clear that we cannot reach racial reconciliation without racial repentance first, which means that discussions of forgiveness are premature. In fact, concerning the crimes of his countrymen, Baldwin declares, “Neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them” (*Price* 334). Too often, white Americans have demanded cheap grace and easy forgiveness without offering sincere repentance first. For example, in 2007, in response to talk of a formal apology for slavery, Republican delegate Frank Hargrove said slavery ended nearly 140 years ago with the Civil War and added that “our Black citizens should get over it” (“Get Over Slavery”). White people like Hargrove demand a superficial reconciliation that does not require anyone to change the collective narrative or the balance of power first. Carol Anderson, the author of *White Rage*, says, “We have tended to forgive those who waged the most sustained, brutal assaults in the name of white supremacy, without requiring them to repudiate their beliefs or actions in return. We have rationalized that forgiveness, that generosity, as ‘moving on’ and as helping the nation to heal. But misusing forgiveness does neither.” As Anderson says, “Forgiveness is a virtue; the misuse of it is not” (Anderson, “If You”). In *God of the Oppressed*, James H. Cone contends that when white Christians ask, “What about the doctrine of reconciliation? What about Christian forgiveness?” they impose an unfair burden on Black people to forgive and forget in order to appease their own self-centered wish for easy absolution (Cone 226). White discussion of racial forgiveness can be inappropriate, especially when racial repentance has not yet occurred and when racial justice has not yet been established.

To Baldwin, racial repentance is an individual and collective process that includes making amends. In “White Racism or World Community,” Baldwin declares that “we are responsible for our soul’s salvation, not the bishop, not the priest...ultimately it is each man’s responsibility alone in his chamber before his own gods to deal with his health and his sickness” (*Price* 441). In other words, racial repentance is each person’s individual responsibility. But Baldwin makes it clear that racial repentance is a collective responsibility too. He explains that racist ideas do not really come from the mob or from the people but from the “architects of the American State.” In reflecting back on the civil rights era, he says, “The will of the people, or the State, is revealed by the State’s institutions. There was not then, nor is there now, a single American institution which is not a racist institution” (Baldwin, *Price* Introduction). Slavery, lynching, segregation, employment and housing discrimination, voter suppression, unequal access to quality education, concentrated poverty, the wealth gap, racial profiling, police brutality, mass incarceration—these were and are public, systemic, transgenerational problems—much larger and more widespread than the individual prejudice of any single person, policy, or event. Therefore, a private, individual repentance is inadequate to address these issues and the legacy of their consequences today. In “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel,” Baldwin says, “We made the world we’re living in and we have to make it over” (*Price* 244). Repentance requires both individual reform and institutional reform, change within people and policies, sinners and systems.

To Baldwin, racial repentance also includes justice, and justice often includes holding people accountable with meaningful and appropriate consequences. As Baldwin explains, “People seldom do give their power away; forces beyond their control take their power from them” (*Price* 259). On the eve of the civil rights movement, Dr. King said, “Justice is love

correcting that which revolts against love” (King “MIA Mass Meeting”). Justice is love—love for the offender and love for those they have hurt—and it is correction. In the process of racial repentance, it is necessary to hold people accountable when they cause harm, even—and especially—when the offenders are among those we love and with whom we most identify.

Baldwin contends that the story of white Christianity in America as it relates to racial injustice has been a story of silence, denial, and justification. Confession, then, begins in how white Christians tell their story. In his essay, “As Much Truth As One Can Bear,” Baldwin says, “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced” (*Cross* 34). If the majority of white Christians continue to tell their history in a way that justifies or minimizes sin, maintains white innocence, blames Black people, or portrays God as the inspiration for their racism, then the repentance process has not even begun. What we have instead are what Baldwin calls “avalanches of tokens and concessions” (*Price* Introduction). As Baldwin says, “White power remains white. And what it appears to surrender with one hand it obsessively clutches in the other” (*Price* Introduction). Without full confession—without justice and serious changes to how white Christians tell their history—any attempt to confront racism, however sincere, can appear hollow and hypocritical.

Baldwin suggests that the process of racial repentance might include revising and expanding our view of God. In his essay, “In Search of a Majority,” Baldwin says that “the role of the Negro in American life has something to do with our concept of what God is, and from my point of view, this concept is not big enough...God is, after all, not anybody’s toy” (*Price* 234). Baldwin believes God should not be used as a means of maintaining power and control. “I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not a means to control others,” he says (Baldwin, *Price* 234). As Baldwin scholar Michael F. Lynch says, “Baldwin finds white

Christian theology severely limited by racist implications and a dwarfed, self-serving image of God” (Lynch “Just Above My Head”). To expand their view of God, white Christians would have to stop citing God as the inspiration for their racist beliefs, behaviors, and policies (past and present). If white Christians believe that God is fair, just, and loving, then they have to stop telling their history in a way that portrays him as something else. As Baldwin says, “If one believes in the Prince of Peace, one must stop committing crimes in the name of the Prince of Peace” (*Price* 441). Baldwin, in fact, describes Christ as a disturber of the peace, a man who identifies with the poor and the oppressed, the mistreated and the marginalized, or “the least of these,” a man who was despised, viewed as a criminal, and ultimately lynched by an angry mob between two thieves. Baldwin scholar Jean-Pierre Fortin explains that Baldwin writes from “his own experience of the pain caused by Christian oppression which, paradoxically, at the same time provides him with a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ, the suffering God.” As Fortin says, Baldwin “knows only a suffering God can and does save the oppressed, marginalized, and excluded, and he thus summons the Christian community to bear faithful witness to such a God” (Fortin “White Church”). Baldwin reminds us that God is on the side of the oppressed—not the oppressive or the powerful. And he reminds us that Christ was not killed for preaching peace, love, and unity; he was killed for telling hard truth and condemning hypocrisy. People viewed him as a threat to their power, privilege, and identity.

To Baldwin, racial repentance also includes revising and expanding our view of ourselves, individually and collectively, and this revision requires a reckoning with hard truth about who we are. In his essay, “The Creative Process,” Baldwin says, “The truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be. The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation” (*Price* 317). To Baldwin, repentance is intricately tied

to identity. To be “born again” is to create a new identity for ourselves based on something better than innocence or selective memories of the past that favor us. Baldwin teaches that white racism will cease to exist when white people learn how to accept and love themselves and each other. When they do this, he says, “the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed” (Baldwin, *Price* 340). Baldwin reminds us that the basic assumption of the Christian church “is that *all* men are the sons of God and that *all* men are free in the eyes of God” (*Price* 438). This reminder is a call for us to value the worth and humanity of Black people, but it can also serve as a reminder to white Christians of what their own identity should be based on: the belief that they are beloved children of God.

CONCLUSION

Baldwin often said that he “left the church to preach the gospel” (Leeming 102). He knew, as many other civil rights leaders knew, that this fight was not just a battle for integration; it was, and continues to be, a battle to redeem the soul of America. To Baldwin, repentance is more than a feeling of sorrow or regret; it is a courageous moral choice—a journey of self-correction, personal growth, and love. It is not a single act of restitution, a token gesture, or a simple apology; it is a life-changing process of conversion. And he wonders “if there is left in the Christian civilization the moral energy, the spiritual daring, to atone, to repent, to be born again” (*Price* 441). Baldwin declares that the revolution which began two thousand years ago by a “disreputable Hebrew criminal” must begin again today (437). He declares, “Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up” (234). In other words, when it comes to racism, Christian love is best expressed through Christian repentance.

Baldwin’s work invites us to engage in the kind of individual and collective repentance that would lead to healthier, stronger identities and more loving communities. On an individual

level, racial repentance could lead to an improved self-image unmarred by a sense of hypocrisy, guilt, or internal conflict and to a greater sense of peace, integrity, and self-respect as one's rhetoric and choices begin to align more closely with one's values. The process of racial repentance could create in individuals a more mature self-awareness, more loving interpersonal relationships, and less conflict with loved ones over the deeply divisive tension caused by racial ignorance. Transparency about racial wrongdoing helps to restore love and trust between people. As Dr. King once taught, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community" (King "Facing"). Collective racial repentance means less social conflict, less need for racial protests, less fear and misjudgment of each other, more diverse perspectives, and economic policies that better serve everyone. The ultimate goal of racial repentance is a healthier nation and healthier churches where communities based on love, respect, trust, inclusion, and belonging can flourish.

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Notes

¹ See *In His Image, But...Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910*. See also *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. See also *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*.

² According to a 2017 special report by the U.S. Department of Justice, most crime is intraracial, meaning that most white people are victimized by other white people and most Black people are victimized by other Black people. In the majority of violent victimizations, white victims' offenders were white (57%) and Black victims' offenders were Black (63%). Source: "Race and Hispanic Origin of Victims and Offenders," October 2017, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/rhovo1215.pdf>.