



Manchester University Press

INTERVIEW

“James Baldwin, Return of the Prophet”: An Interview

Cornel West

Abstract

Cornel West was interviewed by Christopher Lydon for *Radio Open Source*; the interview was originally broadcast in September of 2017. They discuss the works of Baldwin, the condition of America, and Baldwin’s relevance to that condition today. The interview is reprinted here by permission of the interviewee.

Keywords: Cornel West, James Baldwin, love, counterculture, truth

[**Christopher Lydon:** Cornel West writes and speaks in the James Baldwin tradition in books like *Race Matters* and *Black Prophetic Fire*. You see him on television between Amy Goodman and Sean Hannity. He's back and forth as a teacher too, at Princeton, and now again, at Harvard.]

CORNEL WEST: You say, Why Baldwin?

CL: Baldwin today.

CW: We live in an age in which there is such a paucity of eloquence. Baldwin exemplifies eloquence at its highest level. Now when Cicero and Quintilian define eloquence as wisdom speaking, I think we'd have to add that it's wisdom speaking that's rooted in a courage that refuses to sell out. We live in an age in which everybody's for sale, everything is for sale. Baldwin never sold out. He was true to himself, he was true to his soul. This is in many ways the Baldwin moment. And it's primarily because we know here is somebody who's committed to intellectual integrity, committed to a moral honesty. Remember he says at the end of *Notes of a Native Son*, in the introduction, all I ever want to be is an honest man, and who, like Hemingway, endures in my work. Now you see, in an age of mendacity and criminality which is our own, just telling the truth and having integrity is revolutionary. It's subversive. It's countercultural. So Baldwin comes back bringing this rich tradition of eloquent truth-telling witness-bearing soul-stirring writing. And he's got the Black church as backdrop. He's listening to Bessie Smith, he's listening to Mahalia Jackson, when he's writing. So you can feel the vibrations and the vibes on the page that are connected to the sonic expressions of geniuses like Bessie Smith and like Ray Charles of course who was probably his favorite, you know, they were together you know at Carnegie Hall...

CL: Yes! Yes! Yes!

CW: ... at a very historical moment. All that to say is what? In this Trump moment, Baldwin comes back with tremendous power, potency, vitality, and vibrancy in part because he's willing to speak the truth not just about the country in the abstract but the truth about legacies of white supremacy, the truth about indifference, the truth about callousness, the truths about the spiritual blackout which is the relative eclipse of integrity, honesty, and decency in public life in the country. That's true for Democrats, that's true for Republicans, true for right wing, true for left wing. It cuts across the board. But Baldwin is one of the few Black intellectuals who was the darling of a slice of liberal elites for a while and then becomes demonized by them later on. That's where you get the narrative of the early

Baldwin and the later Baldwin, as this declines, you see. Baldwin went his own way. He was Emersonian, he was Socratic, in some ways he was Jesus-like even though he left the church in order to preach his own gospel.

CL: Can we go back to that moment in the church, because he kept going back to it in *The Fire Next Time*, but in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, in everything, he's a 14-year-old boy on Lenox Avenue and he's scared on the outside and he's scared on the inside, he's desperate. He surrenders to Jesus but it's the beginning of the end of the church story too. That to me is a definition of his anger, his guilt, his fear, but his indomitability too, with a vengeance. And still, then and ever he's a good person, he's a lover, not a hater, he's not a racist. People said he complained too much, but he was never defeated.

CW: You know he tried to commit suicide twice. I mean those are moments in which despair seemed to have overwhelmed him, he just happened to get out from under and escape. That despair that haunted him every day of his life, at moments it looked as if it would triumph. You are so right. He is certainly a love warrior, he's on the love train. He learns that early on in the gospel about this Palestinian Jew named Jesus. And he encounters the lack of that love in the church, the lack of that love in his stepfather who is a pastor, the lack of that love in this community. He finds the love in Sister Bill, the white teacher who takes him to Shakespeare, who takes him to these various plays. And he says quite explicitly that he loses his faith owing to the hypocrisy of the church but also from reading Dostoevsky. And when he gets cussed out for coming back from a Shakespeare play that Bill the white woman teacher who loved him to death and would take him around, and his father says, "You will no longer go see those plays, that's of the devil." He just got Shakespeare. He says no. The incongruity, the contradiction, the inconsistencies are too overwhelming, the church must go. Now there's a sense in which, like so many church women and church men, that he leaves the church for wonderful reasons because he encounters a love in what that church has to offer at its best. And he remains that love warrior his whole life. And he can't conceive of himself without the metaphors and the stories and the narratives...

CL: And the language.

CW: ... and the songs and the language that come out of that church, especially that Black church experience. But he refuses to be parochial, he refuses to be provincial, he refuses to be myopic, and most importantly he refuses to be xenophobic. Now unfortunately, you know, most of the church has accommodated itself to myopia, domination, xenophobia, and so on. And therefore many of us can understand why he left the church. But there's a sense in which the best of the church never left him, just like he never went to college, but a college went through him. He was self-taught, he was a voracious reader, and he was really a kind of a democratic saint, if you define a saint as a sinner who looks at the world

through the lens of the heart. He was heartbroken; America broke his heart, day in and day out.

CL: What is that love that still speaks in Baldwin?

CW: Baldwin's story is profoundly autobiographical. It really is. Because in Baldwin's own life there's so much hatred and self-hatred, there's so much fear, he's being terrorized and traumatized all the time. And yet he's got to fortify himself. He fortifies himself intellectually, reading voraciously, he fortifies himself spiritually, by yearning and trying to unearth sources of love, deep love. He doesn't want to be like Socrates and Hamlet, which is, those who suffer from the incapacity to love, even given intellectual sophistication. That's the last thing he wants. He wants to be more like Amos, Jesus, and in the end like the blues men and women. And in the end, it's the blues men and women who become the very model. You know the wonderful essay "The Uses of the Blues"?

CL: Yes.

CW: Oh, that's a classic piece. Classic piece. You really see what is keeping Baldwin afloat, what is in some way allowing all of those composite contradictory tendencies within his own soul to hang together. It is the blues. It is being on intimate terms with catastrophe and yet responding to that catastrophe with unbelievable style, with a smile, with courage and compassion.

CL: With lyricism, Ralph Ellison said.

CW: And that's what it is. How do you hone a self with integrity in a context of such chronic misery? How do you produce a sound that is full of delicacy and vulnerability, given to mastery of craft and technique, but unbelievable delicacy and vulnerability, in a world that's trying to crush you?

CL: Speak to Baldwin as he speaks about America, speaks to us today. For example, this is more than fifty years ago, he said, "Privately, we cannot stand our lives and dare not examine them;"—that's us, one to one—"domestically, we take no responsibility for (and no pride in) what goes on in our country; and, internationally, for many millions of people, we are an unmitigated disaster."

CW: Since 2001, how many precious Muslim brothers and sisters have been killed? Innocent ones. A million. That's a lot of human beings. We're in denial. Is there any public discourse about a million Muslims killed since 2001? Absolutely not. We don't even count; we don't even keep track of the bodies; we don't even keep track of the bodies publicly of the American soldiers who have been involved in the invasion and occupations. Now each life is precious no matter what country they're from. But we're in denial. That's on the international front. The empire working in denial. Then you come home and the claim is innocence. What does Baldwin say? Innocence itself is the crime. Innocence itself is the crime. We're innocent. We don't take responsibility for what's going on here: poverty, wealth inequality. All you have to do is work hard, all you have to do is

sacrifice, defer gratification. Now, there's structures and institutions in place that make it very difficult for people to have access to the things requisite for the quest for the American dream that people are still valorizing. Baldwin is hitting it head on. Innocence itself is the crime. You're living in a state of denial. And, back to Socrates again, who has the courage to critically examine themselves and their country in order to become more courageous, more service-oriented citizens and human beings? Baldwin's challenge is more relevant now than it's ever been.

CL: He writes in *The Fire Next Time*, “The American Negro”—this is 1963—“The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace... The tendency,” he says, in Africa and America, “has really been ... to dismiss white people as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.”

CW: But you know that things have changed since Obama, though, in regards to that claim. You see all of a sudden how Blackness becomes in part a species of blindness in regard to moral integrity. It's just a matter of success. He won, he won, we've got to defend him. It's a beautiful thing he won, especially given who he was running against. But Baldwin was about integrity. He's about moral consistency. Right? 25,000 bombs dropped year after year under Obama. What do Black spokesmen say? Not a mumbling word. Would Baldwin have spoken out? Hell yes. We're in a post-Obama moment, which is a neo-fascist moment linked to Trump, and Bannon, and others. But we also are dealing with a Black community very different from what Baldwin was talking about. We are dealing with a Black community that was involved in symbolic celebration but concrete hibernation, in terms of critique of empire, critique of wealth inequality, critique of class inequality, and so forth, you see. One way of putting it is that too many Black people, who I love very dearly each and every one of them, have been involved in breakdancing in the air but sleepwalking on the ground. Sleepwalking on the ground! Time to wake up! Black Lives Matter, the movement for Black Lives, was a rude awakening from the young folk. How you gonna have a Black Lives Matter movement with a Black president? You got to remind the Black president that Black Lives Matter? Yes you do. Yes you do. Because these police. Men getting shot. And not one of them going to jail. With a Black president, Black attorney general and the Black Homeland Security cabinet member. Something is wrong, right? And Baldwin in the 60s, he's writing about a Black community that hadn't succumbed to the myths of the flag. More Black folk were cross-bearers than flag-wavers. Now we got more Black folk who are flag-wavers than cross-bearers. That's not good. Not on the moral spiritual tip. No, no. It's good in terms of celebrating

Black success at the highest level. But you could imagine how celebrating Black success at the highest level become the way of hiding and concealing social misery and suffering in the empire in which we find ourselves.

CL: Speak of the language master here. And you're one in your own right.

CW: Well, no, no, Baldwin is in a league of his own. But the beauty of the language, the vitality of the language, just like in the music, is a way of sustaining selves that are in the process of being crushed, demeaned, devalued, dominated, exploited, subjugated, and so forth. And so Baldwin does understand that life is a battlefield. Baldwin's got that fusion of Athens and Jerusalem that is magnificent but is rooted in gutbucket blues, catastrophe, and the lyricism as weaponry against what's coming at him, you see. Now, why is that important? Well because these days you can imagine a reduced Baldwin would use his language as a way of bringing attention to his gifts rather than using his gifts to be of service to the cause. Because now we got brands rather than causes. So persons who do have wonderful language, it's primarily to bring attention to themselves to promote their brand, for their careers, whereas for Baldwin the gifts that he had was to give to others to try to empower others for a cause. Baldwin was never reducible to a brand. If he was reducible to a brand he would have remained a darling of the liberal establishment because that's where his brand was unbelievably popular and flourishing. He made the most money at that time and so forth. When he shifted, it was a shift in cash, money, livelihood; he had to choose between career and calling. He had to choose between profession and vocation. Professional writer? No, my vocation is truth teller. It's very different. He would have to cut more radically against the grain these days because these days brands are hegemonic. Causes are pushed to the margin.

CL: How do we explain the decline, shall we say, of eloquence, of truth telling, of the church heritage, the spiritual tradition, of the urgency, the independence of a man like James Baldwin? I mean, look around. All kinds of stars out there. But that voice?

CW: Well as I say we live in a moment of spiritual blackout though, brother. The eclipse of integrity is so pervasive. The commodification and marketization, the commercialization of everything and everybody, which is expedited intensely every moment, makes it much more difficult for persons to sustain a commitment to something broader than just the next moment of consumption and the next moment of self-promotion. It's a very different kind of moment, it really is. You see it in Baldwin. I mean at the end of *Fire Next Time*, '62 *New Yorker*, '63 in publication, that he's got hopes. But after the death of Medgar, and Malcolm, and Martin, and so many precious nameless ones in the South, and Shwerner, and Chaney, and others, his hopes really begin to wane, and he becomes much more a severe critic with almost an apocalyptic sensibility, as opposed to a critic who's tied to utopian possibilities that have some sense of being

actualized. And that's part of his legacy too. I mean you got a whole school of Afropessimism that's growing every day, it's a whole school of thought, and it could pull from elements of Baldwin, even though we know Baldwin's a prisoner of hope, we know Baldwin never gave up on possibility, but it got less and less and less space in his corpus.

CL: Cornel West, you live among your students and listen very, very carefully. What are they hearing in James Baldwin today?

CW: They're hearing someone who refused to allow his fire to be dampened by overwhelming bleakness and darkness. And that's a beautiful thing. You know and I know if the only American citizen who could vote were under thirty, my dear brother Bernie Sanders would be in the White House rather than the neo-fascist Trump. That's a sign of hope. The young folk have experienced waves of awakening tied to ecological catastrophe, nuclear catastrophe. They're less racist than their parents—not to say they're not racist, but much less racist, much less xenophobic, much more open to our gay brothers, lesbian sisters, and transgender folk. And much more concerned about class issues. But Trump is the fire this time. It's here. Neo-fascism is unfolding before our very eyes, undermining sources of opposition, be it press, be it courts, be it university, feeling as if it's inevitable that you have to move in a right-wing populace, a xenophobic nationalist and neo-fascist direction, trashing and demonizing the voices that would try to bring some critique to bear. And thank God we're seeing the best of America in the Woman's marches and the marches in the airports and so forth. But how they will translate given the stranglehold of the institutions, because institutional capacity is very important for a movement, it's not just a matter of hitting the streets, you see, you have to have some institutional capacity that can sustain the resistance and have some impact. And with Bannon and others, you know, these are folk who are reading very closely the Julian Evolas, and reading very closely the Gentiles and other theorists of fascism, and they've got to apply it to US circumstances but it's very real. That's the fire this time.

Contributor's Biography

Cornel West is the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair at Union Theological Seminary. He teaches the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, courses in Philosophy of Religion, African American Critical Thought, and a wide range of subjects—including the classics, philosophy, politics, cultural theory, literature, and music. He has written twenty books but is best known for his classics *Race Matters* (1994) and *Democracy Matters* (2004), and for his memoir, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud* (2010). His most recent book, *Black Prophetic Fire* (2014), offers an unflinching look at nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American leaders and their visionary legacies.