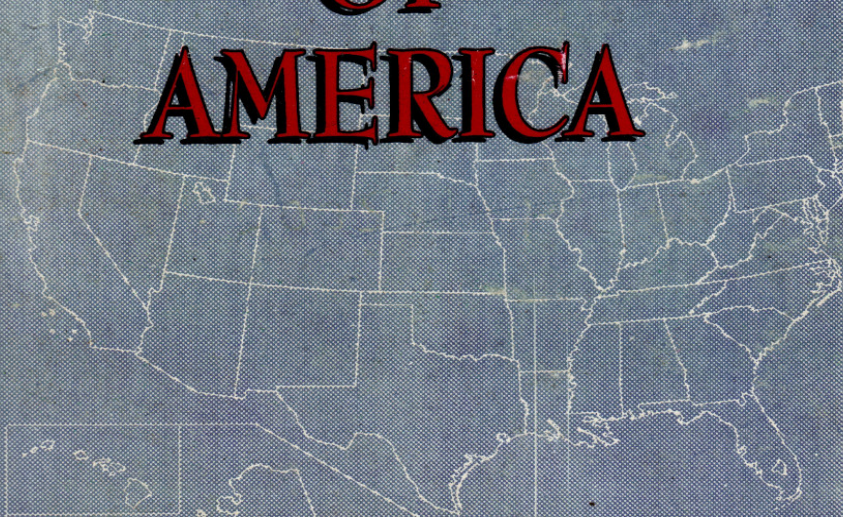


# RELIGION IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



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**Religion as a Vehicle for Cultural Cohesion: James Baldwin's 'Go Tell It on the Mountain' and Zaynab Alkali's 'The Virtuous Woman' and 'The Stillborn'**

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## INTRODUCTION

Ordinarily, the received dogma which affirms the existence and presence of an all-knowing, all-powerful and all-caring God serves as a check on the attitudes and behaviour of individuals in a normal society. A set of dos and don'ts therefore emerges in such a setting to guide members from acting out of step in order to maintain parlance. Anyone who goes against the established norms will automatically be checked by mores of the society or pricked by his conscience. Thus, members in the community are conditioned by religion which acts as a balm to foster cultural cohesion. Beliefs like this have

regulated individual and community behaviours for as long as the human species has thrived on our planet.

Religion seeks to domesticate the conscience and the soul which together constitute the essence of the human being. By regulating the mental state of humans, religion effectively controls their physical behaviour. Similarly, a society or community united by a set of religious beliefs subdues itself to such dogmas. Even in a situation where no overriding religious umbrella exists, people may opt to practice their faith individually within their abodes.

### Reading Cultural Cohesion

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* portrays a society stained by materialism and racism where, despite the abundance of resources, poverty still prevails especially among African Americans and other racial minorities. Religion -Christianity- prevails in the novel and the two opposing ways in which it is manifested i.e. the fake and the genuine, are flung at the reader in unmitigated fashion. Still, it sustains the American Society so portrayed. As a writer, Baldwin reviled "the historical role of Christianity in the enslavement of black people", but he never forgot "the compensatory values of his religious experience". He ran away from extreme Christian religious practice in store front black churches, but affirmed that:

In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare (Keneth Kinnamon, ed. 1974:3)

Hence, "for good or ill, Baldwin's work (art)\* is of a kind in which the didactic -even homiletic- element is of the essence" (*ibid*). In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* therefore, the characters employ Christianity as a survival strategy to cushion them against upheavals in their racially ordered American Society. As the youthful protagonist, John Grimes, grows in faith and aspires to emancipate his Harlem, an African-American community from white oppression, his step-father, Gabriel Grimes, employs his pastoral ministry to hoodwink people while claiming to be holy and anointed. In spite of these opposing manifestations however, Christianity sustains and conditions them as a force for cohesion. Zaynab Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman* and

*The Stillborn*, operate largely under Islamic settings where the people and the societies we encounter vouch allegiance to the Supreme Being (Allah) and strive to practicalise the tenets of Islam in their daily lives. Religion in the two works is all-pervasive and is the norm among adults and children alike. Like Baldwin's protagonist, John, Alkali's Li and Nana are folk characters, but the setting in Baldwin's novel is more urbanized.

*The Virtuous Woman* proceeds with a quotation from the Bible (Proverbs 31) affirming the inestimable worth of a woman with virtues:

"Strength and Honour are her clothing and she shall rejoice in time to come" In the story we are introduced to an ordered and peaceful rural community, Zuma, which nestles among hills "like a tiny baby between her mother's breasts" (Alkali 1986:1). Within the Zuma community however there is occasional tension emanating from the ruling elite represented by the village chief and the district administration based in Birnin Adama. The village chief for instance, fumed at the prospect of a commoner's children gaining admission to a renowned college for girls. He is of the view that his own daughters "deserve a place in the college of the woman-chief-of-the whites", where "only the children of the rich, those of royal blood, high ranking officials and politicians are (supposedly) taken" (3).

On the other hand, the provincial headquarters, Birnin Adama, "where all the major directives affecting the lives of the people in the villages under that province (such as Zuma) originated," poses a threat to areas under its jurisdiction in the sense that the people and villages "felt no impact of the government except when taxes were due" (2)

However, in spite of these potential sources of acrimony and division, religion formed a canopy under which the villagers assembled, mingled and resolved their grievances. A point that readily crosses the mind of the reader of Alkali's two novellas is the liberal nature of the people in the communities so depicted. The settings in both the *Virtuous Woman* and *The Stillborn* embrace both Islam and Christianity, although the writer dwells mainly on Islamic characters in her portrayal. Thus, it is in the village mosque that communal matters are raised and resolved. This is unlike the traditional African setting where such issues are debated in the village square in a

meeting of titled elders as in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. It is therefore not surprising to encounter characters-children and adults alike-in Alkali's texts who manifest a predominantly Islamic ethos in their daily lives and perception of phenomena.

In *The Stillborn*, Alkali vividly recreates the scene of a religious event in which the sub-conscious and the conscious worlds commune. A sensitive and perceptive girl child, Li dreams that a terrible accident is imminent for her father and fellow villagers planning to attend a prayer meeting "twenty miles from the village". She recounts her dream:

'I was in a strange compound... in a strange village. There were many people sitting in the dust with their backs to the wall. I walked towards them and peered into their faces, but could not recognize a single person. Their faces were long and sad and nobody spoke to me. Nobody moved or smiled at me. I noticed some had dust in their hair and on their faces. It was strangely quiet... as if I was in the graveyard. I panicked and tried to run but tripped over outstretched legs. I screamed and bolted away from the courtyard. Outside, in front of the compound, I had to stop because there was an obstacle in my way. I took a closer look and discovered fresh, brown mounds all over the place, ten, twenty, thirty... I screamed and woke up.' Li was trembling at the memory of the dream. Baba was quiet now and listening to her.

'Baba, I have a strange feeling something bad is going to happen. I had this feeling during the dream and I still have it now'. There were tears in her large, round eyes (10).

Although Li's father, Baba was skeptical of his daughter's intuition and told her: "Look Li you are imagining things. This is the work of the devil," he nevertheless was moved. Li on her part, could not be

dismissed with such a light rebuke. She clung to her ominous dream:

One thing was clear to her, something bad was going to happen, whether or not dreams were figments of the imagination. She had such dreams before and whenever they were accompanied by certain weird sensation, which she had come to recognise, something always happened (11).

However, when late in the afternoon of the same day as "the shadows had started to lengthen... a procession of three lorries arrived at the Memorial Hospital" with the dead and injured, Li's dream turned out to be real. Apparently, "there had been a sudden storm in the morning and the prayer house, which had been in a state of ruin for years, had collapsed, killing thirty-five people. Many more were still buried under the debris. There were at least a hundred casualties" (10) Her father, Baba was among the casualties because he refused to listen to his daughter's advice not to go to the prayer meeting (9). Li was thus viewed as an extraordinary child in her community in spite of her father's negative view of her. More relevantly, the incident revealed the affinity between the physical and supernatural worlds and the interplay with their religious orientation.

In Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the people we encounter are predominantly African-American. They are effectively conditioned by religion and view every phenomena from the religious standpoint. Thus Christianity is at the root of their existence. The absence of the Christian religion would have spelt chaos and doom to them. The characters in the novel are recent migrants from Southern plantations to Northern urban ghettos. In the south they were essentially share croppers, their fore-parents having recently been emancipated from slavery. As children of ex-slaves therefore, the people in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* would not easily let go of such a viable avenue of support. Hence, although the movement of blacks from Southern plantations to Northern urban centres is viewed as "a process of secularization" by Robert Bone, it nevertheless retains essential religious elements because the protagonist in the novel, John Grimes "gets religion" even though "he is too young, too frightened, and too

innocent to grasp the implications of his choice" (Kinnamon, ed. 1974:33). Bone rightly observes that:

To a young boy growing up in the Harlem ghetto, damnation was a clear and present danger: "For the wages of sin were visible everywhere, in every wine stained and urine-splashed halt-way, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue". To such a body, the store-front church offered a refuge and a sanctuary from the terrors of the street. God and safety became synonymous, and the church, a part of his survival strategy (32).

Although Bone's assessment applies primarily to the writer-Baldwin, it fits John Grime's experiences in the novel. It is all the more apt when one considers that the fictionalized protagonist of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* shares overwhelming experiences and traits with its author.

The central event of *Go Tell It in the Mountain* is the religious conversion of an adolescent boy. In a long autobiographical essay, which forms a part of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin leaves no doubt that he was writing of his own experience. During the summer of his fourteenth year, he tells us, he succumbed to the spiritual seduction of a woman evangelist. On the night of his conversion, he suddenly found himself lying on the floor before the altar. He describes his trancelike state, the singing and clapping of the saints, and the all-night prayer vigil which helped to bring him "through" (31).

The encounter above remained poignant in the protagonist's and the author's psyches.

Like Alkali's Nana and Li in the *Virtuous Woman* and *The Stillborn* respectively, Baldwin's John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* believes firmly in religion as an avenue to God and salvation. Thus, in spite of their pranks, the central characters in the selected texts by the two writers always derived sanctuary in their religious practice. It should

be emphasised that these characters are all adolescents when we first encounter them. However, for John Grimes, his mother's injunction was the gospel truth. Elizabeth had told John what he regarded as her text:

'there's a whole lot of things you don't understand. But don't you fret. The Lord'll reveal to you in his own good time everything he wants you to know. You put your faith in the Lord, Johnny, and He'll surely bring you out. Everything works together for good for them that love the Lord, (Baldwin 1953:32)

This message became cardinal in Johnny's subsequent striving, especially as he realised the wickedness of the American society surrounding him. Similarly, in the two texts by Alkali, parental injunctions to their children that bordered on religion prevailed, even when these children blundered. In *The Stillborn*, Li's grand father, Kaka advises her:

'Learn to be patient,' .... 'You never lose by being patient'.  
'May the gods of your ancestors bless you child (Alkali 1984:64)

In the end, this paid off as she was re-united with her husband, Habu, who had stayed away from her for four years. Also, in *The Virtuous Woman*, Nana Ai's strict parental upbringing disciplined her and enabled her to reject a car ride offer from a stranger even when her friend, Laila was willing to accept. Laila argues "I saw no harm in accepting a free ride like that, especially from a government official", but Nana retorts that she never accepts free rides from strangers since these could lead to danger such as sexual exploitation. Although the two texts are novelettes and therefore sketchy, they dwell on morality and religion and how these impact on people, especially children in the society.

Baldwin on the other hand, vividly depicts characters in the racially stained American setting who experience "both the fall and the redemption." One of these is John's mother, Elizabeth. Another is his adoptive father, Gabriel. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is, indeed, characterised by religious allusion from start to end. Bone argues

that, "through this allusion Baldwin alerts us to the metaphorical possibilities of his plot" (Kinnamon, ed. 1974:34). Elizabeth conceived Johnny for her boy-friend, Richard. However, Richard died before John was born. Gabriel who had had a bastard son, Royal, chided Elizabeth for her supposed loose morality. When subsequently Elizabeth bore him many children, Gabriel rejected John as his child, focusing instead on Roy. Gabriel viewed John as a usurper who had no rightful claim to his lineage which he believed to be "God's anointed." He even forced a comparison between the Biblical Abraham, regarding John as Ishmael (Abraham's bastard son) and Roy as Isaac (Abraham's rightful heir). But as it turned out, Roy was vicious and a disappointment to his father. Johnny who was gifted, was rejected by Gabriel and loved by Elizabeth.

The religious symbolism of "guilty father and rejected son" is "an emblem of race relations in America" and "Baldwin wants us to view Gabriel and Johnny in metaphorical relation to Abraham and Isaac" (34-35)

Baldwin sees the Negro quite literally as the bastard child of American civilization. In Gabriel's double involvement with bastardy we have a re-enactment of the white man's historic crime. In Johnny, the innocent victim of Gabriel's hatred, we have an archetypal image of the Negro child. Obliquely, by means of an extended metaphor, Baldwin approaches the very essence of Negro experience. That essence is rejection, and its most destructive consequence is shame. But God, the Heavenly Father does not reject the Negro utterly. He casts down only to raise up. This is the psychic drama that occurs beneath the surface of John's conversion.

The Negro child, rejected by the whites for reasons that he cannot understand, is afflicted by an overwhelming sense of shame. Something mysterious, he feels, must be wrong with him, that he should be so cruelly ostracized. In time he comes to associate these feelings with the color of his skin- the basis, after all, of his rejection. He feels, and is made to feel, perpetually dirty and unclean.

This quality of Negro life, unending struggle with one's own blackness, is symbolized by Baldwin in the family name, Grimes (35)

Tellingly, in the works of the two writers being analyzed, religious ministers tend to use their privileged positions to worsen the plights of the people. In Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman*, the chief of the Zuma village who under Islam should be a staunch and devout religious and political leader of his people, expressed disgust and envy at the prospect of the daughters of an ordinary villager attending a reputable college. He would rather have his own children attend such a school. In anger, he fumes: "what business have the children of a common man like Boni (the father of the privileged girls) in the college of the chief...?" (Alkali 1986:3). Thus the chief was not a suitable moral and social custodian of his community. The statement by the chief of Zuma can be likened to that of Gabriel Grimes concerning John, his adopted but 'bastard' son. Through his illicit sexual deals, Gabriel had fathered, but disowned a male child, Royal, during his childless marriage to Deborah. Royal's mother, Esther who Gabriel did not marry, really loved him and died through frustration resulting from this affair. Royal later died under violent circumstances and Gabriel could not own up before his death. This same Gabriel turned round to regard himself as "God's anointed", accusing Elizabeth (his subsequent wife) of sexual promiscuity since her child, John was born out of wedlock. Gabriel quoted the book of Genesis in *The Holy Bible* to validate his pious claims, for he viewed John as a potential usurper of his 'anointed' lineage. When Elizabeth gave birth to Roy the second for Gabriel and Roy turned away from God, Gabriel was bitter. Ironically, it is the rejected child, John who became converted to serve God. Gabriel therefore said: "only the son of the bondwoman stood where the rightful heir should stand" (Kinnamon, ed. 1974:34). In other words, both the chief of Zuma in Alkali's book and the self-styled anointed pastor, Gabriel Grimes in Baldwin's text felt superior to folks under their charge even when unfolding events proved contrary.

In Baldwin's novel, although the prevailing issue is the Christian religion, we find that people like Gabriel are hypocrites who practice a secular and material creed which is unchristian. His drinking and

promiscuous lifestyle cannot be reconciled with his professed pastoral ministry; he is expected to forgive when wronged, but does not; to be holy and practical in his faith, but is not; to be faithful to his spouse and be a shining light to his flock, but is not; to avoid excessive alcohol intake and be sober, but is not. He instead flirts, visits vengeance on people he perceives to have wronged him and drinks excessively to the point that he sleeps in gutters and visits taverns where prostitutes and rogues abound. Similarly, in Alkali's texts, although Islam prevails in the societies portrayed, aboriginal and superstitious tendencies are common. For instance, in *The Virtuous Woman* the people of Zuma village were fascinated by Baba Sani's behaviour and gradually came to view him as the guardian spirit of the village. Baba Sani was Nana Ai's grand father:

At dawn when every other creature was asleep, he would be seen among hills, by the fountain, though nobody knew exactly what he did at that time of the day... However, this unconventional behaviour resulted in the weaving of mythical stories about his person. A popular one was that he was the guardian spirit of the village, possessed of an animal spirit, and that at night he changed into a lion to guard the village only to change back into a man at dawn. Some people even claimed to have seen his lair (1986:12).

In *The Stillborn*, owing to Li's extraordinary birth, her family wove some myths around her. Some even referred to her a river goddess:

Li came with the bag of waters intact, but what frightened Mama so much was that she did not cry at birth.... at birth a baby always cries. This is nature's way of heralding a newborn. You must be the odd one out not to adhere to this all-important tradition....  
'Li is extra ordinary. At least she looks like a river goddess... with the head of a woman and the tail of a fish' (1984:6-7)

Alkali's *The Stillborn* equally presents a picture of two major religions and cultures existing side by side. Li's village with its Islamic and aboriginal background faces the Hill Station which is the European quarters where the British colonizers reside. The people there are Christians. Thus, there is a potential threat to all of Li's community and culture: Islam and Christianity appear set on a collision course. However, this does not happen within the text:

The village was large and unequally cleft in two by a long narrow stream, almost hidden by its bushy banks. The smaller side of the village was less crowded. It consisted of farm land and a few scattered mud huts which appeared quiet and deserted.

On the opposite and larger side, however, flourished a long stretch of fruit trees, richly dressed in green. Further down, the village lay sprawled in clusters of thatched mud huts. The sun's reflection on the few zinc roofs that were scattered among the clusters threw a blinding light across the village. Lengthwise, the village extended out of sight, but its breadth ended with a range of hills. At the base of the hills was the European quarters known as the Hill Station. The houses here were built of stones and roofed with asbestos. Built on a much higher place and facing the rest of the village, they had assumed the look of an overlord. This advantageous position was further heightened by a thick overgrowth of trees that shrouded the houses, giving them the desired privacy (2).

### End Comments

Baldwin and Alkali therefore depict characters and settings which manifest the positive life-affirming potentialities of the Christian and Islamic religions as well as the negative and destructive ends which some people manipulate these creeds for. Thus, religion is a vehicle; a veritable tool which can (and should) be harnessed for good for all of the society since it sustains and guides people from their genesis to their exit. While Alkali reflects the traditional African setting gradually giving way to the modern in her works, Baldwin portrays

folk African-Americans in a sophisticated metropolis grappling with the problems of urbanization and employing the Christian religion as a possible panacea to their plight. These folks are recent migrants to the North from the rural plantation South.

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