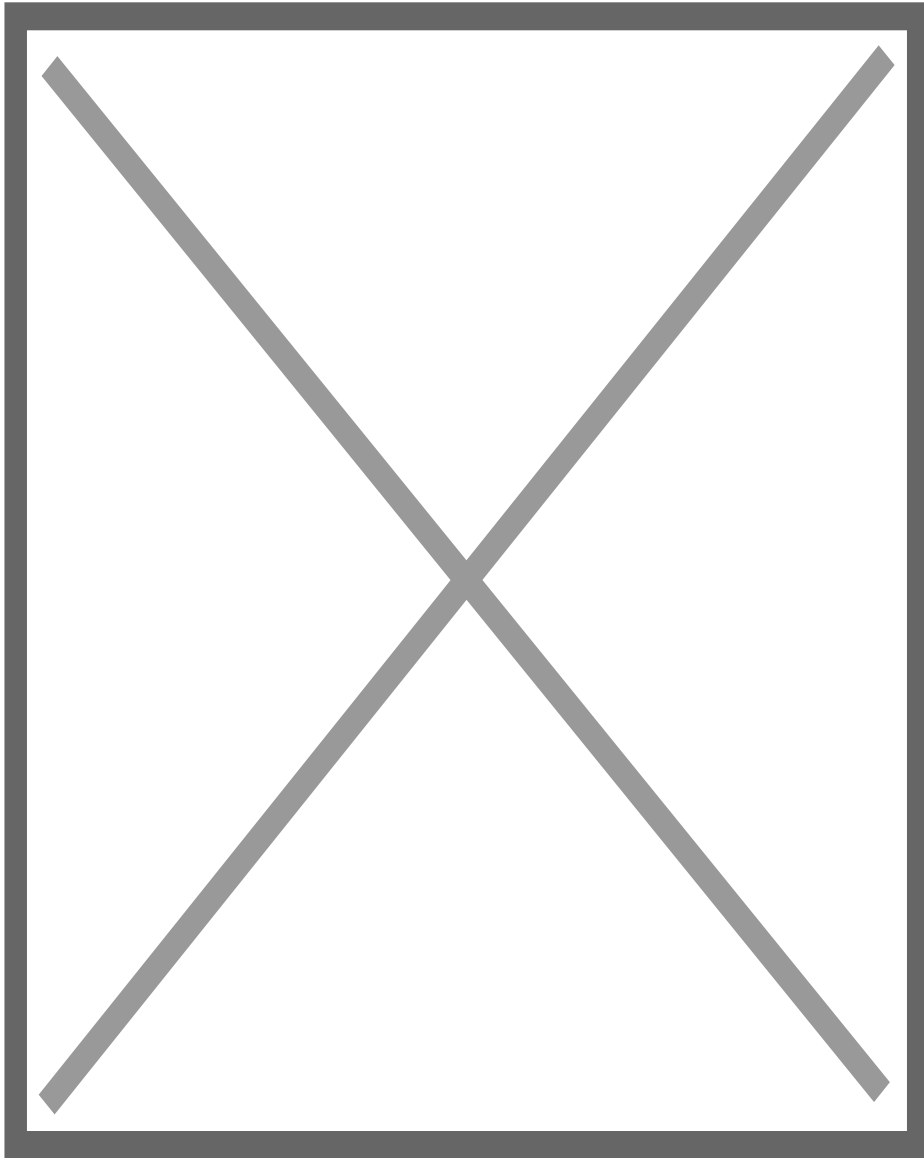


Freedom and the price of the ticket

James Baldwin reminds us that those who seek to police the freedom of others are, ironically, the least free.

by [Kelly Brown Douglas](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue



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In his posthumously published collection *The Price of the Ticket*, James Baldwin explores the cost of being Black in America by first interrogating what it means to be White in America. He observes that early European immigrants—Irish, Italians, French, and others—soon shed their ethnic identities upon arrival and became White. “They come through Ellis Island,” Baldwin writes, “where Giorgio becomes Joe, Pappavasiliu becomes Palmer, Evangelos becomes Evans, Goldsmith becomes Smith or Gold, and Avakian becomes King. So, with a painless change of name, and in the twinkling of an eye, one becomes a white American. . . . The price the

white American paid for his ticket was to become white.”

While Whiteness granted social acceptance, legal protections, and economic opportunity, it came at a profound cost. In seeking to dominate others, White Americans became trapped in a false identity rooted in racial superiority. To embrace Whiteness was to enter a culture founded on domination, exclusion, and the dehumanization of others. This admission carried a deeper existential price: it stifled their capacity to fully realize their own humanity, cutting them off from the very possibility of true freedom.

Few concepts have been more contested in American history than freedom—whether of citizenship, speech, due process, religion, or the press. Yet beneath these social, political, and constitutional arguments lies a deeper, often overlooked truth: freedom is ultimately a theological question.

No group has understood this more profoundly than enslaved Africans. Despite relentless efforts by White enslavers to convince them otherwise, they knew they were not chattel but sacred children of a free and just God. They knew God in freedom—and they knew that their God knew them in freedom. This spiritual conviction meant they could never fully submit to slavery. That belief fueled not only their survival but their resistance—spiritual, emotional, and physical—against systems that denied their humanity. Just as God is not shaped by the forces of the powerful, neither were they subject to structures that sought to diminish their sacred worth.

This theological grounding gave them the moral clarity to reject every lie—religious or political—that portrayed them as less than human, that claimed Black inferiority or White supremacy. Theirs was an inalienable freedom.

Seen through this lens, freedom is not merely a set of legislated rights or privileges. It is a sacred trust—a divine inheritance that reflects the transcendent freedom of God. And yet that trust is often betrayed. Every system or ideology that elevates one group of people by diminishing another profanes this sacred trust. These structures construct a false hierarchy of human worth, stripping people not only of rights but of the sacred dignity rooted in their creation. And today, nothing betrays that trust more than the enduring realities—whether explicit or implicit, political or cultural—that continue to privilege Whiteness.

The question of freedom, then, is not just academic or legal—it cuts to the heart of our humanity. Until we face this truth, our debates about freedom will continue to mask deeper injustices. They will perpetuate policies and ideologies that are not only divisive but dehumanizing—and fundamentally incompatible with any real vision of freedom.

So what are we to do?

Here again, Baldwin is instructive. He calls on White Americans to “do their first works over”—to return not with nostalgia but with moral reckoning. This means retracing the steps that led to the embrace of Whiteness as identity and power and reclaiming the humanity lost in that transaction. It is a call to recover—to rediscover—a self untethered from illusions of racial supremacy.

As a nation, we too must do our first works over. We must ask how a country that boasts of liberty has become a land where so many are unfree—especially those who seek to define or police the freedom of others.

Because ironically, it is they—not the targets of their control—who are often the least free. Bound by the false promises of Whiteness, they fail to recognize how they are cut off from the fullness of their own humanity. True freedom—God-given freedom—liberates us from illusions of superiority and entitlements of privilege. It calls us to reflect the goodness and justice of the God who created all people to be free. To honor that freedom, in ourselves and in others, is the only way to reclaim the cost of the ticket—the price we all must confront—to live into the shared humanity that makes us truly free.