

A Brief Comment on Prison Reform in De-Christianized Society

St Thomas More once wrote a letter to console his daughter before his execution. He drew out a lengthy allegory of prison-like nature of life, and God-as-the-executioner, given the fact of certain pain of death. He argues that the degree of restriction while waiting for execution does not change the fact of the punishment at the end. The man in prison has limited physical freedom, but none the less enjoys the same freedom to meet his death in Christian faith—in fact, the man with less restrictions will face more distractions of the worldly life, which may imperil his souls salvation and entrance into the beatific vision of God. The man imprisoned is in actuality leading a potentially ascetic life, depending on his orientation to God. More had no illusions about the reality of the spiritual intermingling with temporal life.

The phrase "prison-industrial complex" implies a synchronic connotation and an immediate causal relationship. Critical analysis of prison policy, which is a moral issue, is no longer free to see itself from the religious perspective. The "prison-industrial-complex" is a term of the political left of liberalism, and is probably opposed by some conservative political stance extending as far as fascism. The above slogan is a phrase based on the idea that the industrial system of economy, which exists today, produces a gulag in American matched only by other national industrial juggernauts such as Russia or China, who may have a lesser per-capita-incarceration rate due to their Texas-like liberality in execution rates. But there may be other causal reasons which neither a left nor right analysis can see, because both, in the end, operate on what Charles Taylor calls "philosophies of inarticulacy", and as such, certain possible explanations move into conceptual blindspots. The American "gulag" has causal factors that only a diachronic examination reveals.

I am referring to the kind of work which looks at non-material spiritual forces. Both of these terms are off-putting, in the main, for a secularized society. Dorothy Sayers once suggested a term put forth by R.O. Kopp, *diathetic*. Max Weber looks at life in this studious direction when he identifies a "protestant ethic" subsisting in the "spirit of capitalism". This same diathetic approach is used by Charles Taylor in his

criticism of the intrinsic blindness of contemporary philosophy to see the true nature and origin of the contemporary idea of "self".

Weber's thesis revolves around the secularization of a "worldly asceticism", which might be described as leveling. The pre-Reformation and still current Catholic notion of religious asceticism is that some are called to it and choose it, and it is distinct from common life in a visible way. It creates a kind of hierarchy in which higher levels of devotees become, by virtue of their office, able to attend to or mediate with those who do *not* choose the intensity of ascetic religious life. The Great Schism of the west has produced thirty-five thousand distinct cults who hold this Catholic hierarchical structure in *visceral* contempt, while at the same time living in a political structure exactly modeled after the first modern state, the Vatican, which is still a state in good standing at the United Nations. (One will need to read Harold Bermans epic diathetic work *Law and Revolution* which outlines the world shaking events of the "investiture" issue of the 11th century).

Both Weber and Taylor look at the historical fact of the democratic leveling of ascetic life—a life Luther and Calvin insisted was mandatory for *all* adherents to faith in Christ. There is in history, this diathetic school argues, a religiously motivated political interiorization of the "value" of *inwardness* and radical reflexivity which was once reserved to a class of clerics and the occasional unaffiliated (juridically) monkish saint, but was then to be the purview of all. This is seen in sects, especially Puritanism whose adherents were prone to keep a daily business record of the activities of the soul. The important point is that this worldly asceticism as a universal requirement has been *secularized* and proselytizes itself through the moral force of norms. Prison, from this light, can be seen as the legal imposition of the interiorized belief in the worldly ascetic life. Those who succeed in the protestant "duty to the calling" of sacralized economic life will be marked by the sign (sacrament) of pecuniary wealth. Those in need of regeneration must have the duty to the calling of worldly asceticism imposed in a *penitentiary*.

It's no surprise, then, that the American escalation of imprisonment started as an experiment of a particularly radical form of asceticism, the Quakers of Pennsylvania. The first prison is clearly a rationality of a not just "worldly asceticism" but the intense anchoritic form of hermits. The lucky social degenerate was met with

the universal conditions of solitary confinement, no-talk rules of silence and a Bible. This corresponds to the Catholic's desert cave, vows of silence and *lectio divina*. It is merely a logical extension of the belief in the duty-to-the-calling, an ascetic rationale, as the basis for society to draw the conclusion that its imposition on the prisoner will have the result of re-generating a new man fit for society. Little did the Quakers and their fast secularizing deist counterparts know of Catholic wisdom that distinguished between two kinds of ascetic life: the austerity of the anchorite presented particular difficulties that led to the development of coenobitic, or communal, asceticism. One of those difficulties noted by the early desert Fathers was the strange occurrence of *prelest*, a rare sin suffered mainly by hermits. In this extremely holy state of constant meditation, "the arrow that flies at noon" was let loose by the roaring devil, and led many a hermit to madness and death. This new American prison "system" of extreme ascetical practices exhibited an epidemic proportion of madness and suicide, which was noted and reported by Toqueville. Thus embarrassed, the American prison experiment, still operating on the same operative protestant principles, morphed into more coenobitic-communal forms of imprisonment.

The anchoritic style is still used today as a form of non-sanguinary forms of torture for the recalcitrant. These exist as solitary confinement "holes", segregated housing units, protective custody units, and super-maximum security facilities.

The general population "yard" is generally styled as a coenobitic monastery, without the *religious* vows as a requirement. However, there *are* vows one must take—vows to the secularized duty to the calling which likewise subsists in all of our institutions. Unless society and those who think about it can remove its peculiar blindness to the fact of the religious origins of its current situation, it will be stuck in the rut the juggernaut-of-the-system has made for itself. No "good" reform of the prison system can be made unless men and women can recover the capacity to grasp and operate on objective notions of the "good life", rather than on the multitude of philosophies of "inarticulacy", as Taylor calls them. Hopefully, this school, upon which I lay the moniker *diathetic* as suggested by Sayers, will take root on rocky intellectual soil of the industrial landscape that is spreading across the globe like the Saharan desert.

Otherwise, our global economy will need more than just a global schoolhouse—it will generate a need for a global prison as sinister as presented in the *Matrix* movie series.

In fact the very idea of reform itself needs to be examined, as it seems to be a presupposition about which we hold it to be a “good” yet there is little agreement about the direction of reform, and much political argument about it as something that is necessary. The Quakers themselves were motivated by the perceived need to reform the legendary sanguineous punishments of the day. In the long term, this has made punishment less bloody and physically painful—but the need of the State to live up to its purpose of keeping the peace has only escalated in areas which the public finds more tolerable; the bloodless destruction of life and relations as a fulfillment of this purpose is as “ethically valid” as forced treatment to State psychiatric ministrations.

The diathetic approach to scholarly work will permit the re-introduction of Catholic Christian philosophy into the mainstream of American society; the recognition of the truth in regards to the roots of our modern identity in the many errors of the Reformation, Enlightenment and the subsequent syncretist adoption of these operative principles in industrialized Catholics, would open the door to vigorous civil discourse based on sectarian principles which now simmer beneath the surface, so to speak. Religious principles have become the skeletons in the closet, kept out of the political family arguments. What this new “enlightenment” would permit is the recourse to the specifically Thomistic understanding of natural law principles in the arena of discourse of penal policy. The schools of philosophy which now deny any religious connection, if they were to come clean in regard to their ideological sources, and agree to the principles of civil debate, would be required to face the counter-arguments of a new found Catholic voice which today is mostly too timid to speak by its desire to assimilate, or skewed by the fundamentally protestant cultural opinions so as to make then Catholic in name only.

The American penal reform begun by well meaning non-Catholic Christians would have profited greatly from having the Catholic philosophic tradition at its disposal. They would have had the historical circumspection of thousands of years of monastic experience at their fingertips, and the foresight provided might have

changed the initial form of its reform of positive laws in regards to punishment. That might have saved the lives and sanity of many men. The attempts at penal reform today would benefit from the wisdom of Thomas Aquinas. His voice would serve to temper both the so called "law and order" faction that favors the escalation of punishment-as-deterrence and public safety, and the opposing factions that call into question the states overzealous and unrealistic promise to "eradicate crime" and provide a "safer" society, yet propose the sinister escalation of the therapeutic power of the state, which has its roots in the distinctly non-catholic *eugenic* impulse.

At least the early American reformers were unabashedly religious. Today's reformers are secularized people who deny the deeply rooted religious foundation of their beliefs. Even if the reformer is an adherent of some religion, the official language and principals to be spoken while the legislative Court is in session is some bureaucratize invented by the academic-state alliance. Even Catholic universities, having castrated themselves to line up at the financial feed troughs, sing in the high falsetto of the bizarre academic newspeak of the day, and have produced generations of *castratii* who can whistle the Dixie of de-Christianized society.

At some point, Christians are going to have to unify, bring together scholars of the various sects and present a united front not just on issues of dramatic visibility such as abortion, but on the deeper issues of the divisions themselves. Christendom itself has made itself susceptible to the military strategy of divide and conquer, and given today's hegemony of secular forces, conquered it has been. Fortunately we have the Great Promise on our side: "the gates of hell shall not prevail".