

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN PRISON

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The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head. I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with it's bars closed behind me forever; yet you have brought up my life from the pit, o' LORD my God. When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer went up to you, into your Holy Temple... So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Jonah 2:5-6,10
NKJV Bible

The cracked leather of their shiny badges summersaulted open. They flashed big yellow teeth. Shook my hand. Calmingly coaxed me to be cool. You're not under arrest, we just wanna ask you a few questions. Mind coming down to the station with us? Even let me ride in the passenger seat, though I noticed how the quicker of the two sat right behind me. They were so nice in the interrogation room. Want something to drink? Want a candy bar? Some chips maybe? Oh yeah, I love Doritos too. Oh you have to pee? Oh I have to pee too. I'll go with you. Back in the small room, me between them and the wall, them between me and the door. Then, Mr. nice guys no more. Agree with us, they say, and everything will be okay. Agree with us about the robberies. Agree with us about the homicides. We know you did it. You know you did it. Hell, that makes it unanimous! Agree so we can put in a good word with the DA. Why, you were in debt! You were down and out! You were only eighteen! We understand these things. We're not heartless, you know? Just tell us already. Tell us what we already know. Tell us only the version of the truth we know, and only as we know it. And they seem so sympathetic, so genuinely concerned, you almost want to cave to the catharsis of confession...but no. Like the river in Egypt, denial-denial-denial. Then the magic words: I think-maybe I-should I have a lawyer? Now, definitely no more nice. Case files slam shut. Tape recorders click off. Smiles flip upside down. Then the line, the one that reverbs even in my dreams: Welcome to California, you will never leave here. Handcuffs bite tight. Dragged to a smaller room. I'm entombed within a room under another room that only has room for someone who won't need much room, me! Metal door bangs shut.

All the swag, the veneer of no fear, the liar's lividity in my stroke paralyzed, poker face, they all melt away. The room rotates like a flying saucer. Then, out come the words. They burst from within me, like an animal I swallowed but forgot to digest. To the One never considered. To the One only thought about vaguely. To the One merely pondered in passing, passively, as something that is always passing me, but has no relevance to how I will live. Out of the depths of my soul, I cry out "Help me God!!!"

That outcry of mines for intervention from the divine is by no means unique. Instead, it is an anthem, echo'd throughout the eons by millions who've suffered the adversity of prison. Perhaps nothing in life, save death and unpaid taxes, is as certain to cause the personal hell being locked up does. For citizens of wealthy Western cultures such as ours, incarceration becomes an initiation into the despair and danger daily indigenous to Third World countries. Suddenly, you get woke to just how horrible life can get. Suddenly, in the jingle of a handcuff key, freedom disintegrates into bondage, rugged individuality descends into uniformed conformity, and the delusion of safety dissipates into a perpetual atmosphere of fear. The overwhelming truth about incarceration is, what would initially appear to be a battle against one big problem is instead, multiple wars, fought on multiplied fronts, against a multiplicity of problems. Naturally, there's the war between you and the prosecutors. But then, for the impoverished, there's the war between you and your lawyers, many of whom aren't loyal, but are prosecutors dressed like defense lawyers. There's the war between you and the prison administration. There's the war to hold your spouse to their vows, for better but mainly for worse, and to keep your friends by your side, as in bad times way back when, you stuck by theirs. There's the war between you and the barbarians, the apex predators, and the scum of the earth, who, while locked inside by your side, sniff the wind for weakness, and make mince meat out of the meek. There's the war for your mind, the struggle between staying sane and going coo coo for cocoa puffs. Lastly of course, there's the war for your soul, a war you don't even realize is the war to end all wars. In dire straits such as these, when

you become besieged like the Jews at Masada, when you feel fenced in like Field Marshall Rommell trying to fend off Brittain, America, and Russia, it is then that men remember their maker. Just as there are no atheists in a foxhole, there are no non-believers in a supermax cell. While ungodliness and atrocity may purchase your ticket into prison, it is the terrors and deprivations of prison which often foster a thirst for godliness. Arguably, incarceration has brought more souls weeping at the feet of God than the best sermons, from the most eloquent evangelists.

If you think about it, prison has always had a nexus to religion. The Holy Bible, as far back as 1200 B.C.E, records the stories of Joseph, Samson, and Jeremiah, men who were brought into a deeper understanding of God through incarceration experiences. Perhaps the first recorded prison conversion is the story of the Philippian jailer in the book of Acts, who came to faith following an earthquake which unshackled all of his prisoners, including the Apostle Paul, yet none of them sought to escape. During the Crusades, Mamaluk slaves captured by Saladin were granted freedom after taking the Shahaddah, or declaration of faith. Roman Catholics during the Inquisition employed torture and incarceration in an attempt to convert or incriminate heretics. English chaplains assigned to the Tower of London and other medieval dungeons heard confessions from condemned prisoners, some of which were published, such as the 18th century "Ordinary of Newgate Account" which portrayed prisoners as coming to terms with their guilt and preparing for salvation. In the New World, prisons and religion collided with the concept of the "penitentiary". From the Latin 'Paenitentia' meaning "regret or penitence", penitentiary was the term used by the Quakers in Pennsylvania during the 1790's to describe a place of suffering and agony, where penitents could contemplate their sins, feel genuinely afflicted by a sense of guilt, and resolve to change their ways. To understand the Quakers' notion of the penitentiary, one must first understand the Quakers themselves. Quakerism, or, the Religious Society of Friends, was an ostensibly Christian religious denomination that began in England in the mid-1600's. They were said to "tremble" in

the way of the Lord, thus the name "Quakers". At the heart of their doctrine is this idea of seeking religious truth through inner experience. They placed high value on conscience as the arbiter of morality, and promoted personal experience of God over liturgy and ceremony. Naturally, this put the Quakers at odds with Anglicanism and Catholicism, the dominant Christian sects of the British Isles. Persecution drove the Quakers across the Northern Atlantic into the colony of Pennsylvania, founded in 1682 by William Penn as a safe place for Quakers to live and practice their faith. The establishment of Quakerism in Pennsylvania would eventually coincide with the Great Awakening, the historic revival of evangelical religion which engulfed the colonies. Preachers like Johnathan Edwards and his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" profoundly affected the spiritual life of the colonies. It was during this atmosphere of heightened religious sensitivity that new ideas began to take shape, particularly in regards to crime. The Quakers, who had already begun to spearhead the promotion of education, the humane treatment of the mentally ill, and the embryonic stage of the abolitionist movement became, in essence, the first proponents of criminal justice reform in America. Crime then, much as it still is today, was mostly seen through the prism of sociology, but the Quakers influenced the view of crime through a spiritual lense. They saw all lawlessness and misdeeds, criminal or otherwise, as ultimately deriving from the spiritual condition of fallen man known as "sin". Therefore, if crime at its core was really a spiritual problem, then erradicating it required spiritual solutions. As far back as Thomas Aquinas and his famous treatise "Summa Theologiae", there has existed this idea that man's laws are subsidiaries of God's divine law, and therefore, respect for man's law can only be achieved by instilling a reverence for the divine law. The Quakers did not believe criminals would miraculously be reformed over time, no matter how much time they served. It was what happened while they served that time that mattered. Thus, the Pennsylvania system of penology was born. Places like Eastern State Penitentiary and the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia reflected this belief in man's ability to change through reflection and remorse. Solitary confinement was a critical component of the Quakers'

brand of penology. The original idea was to cut prisoners off from all human contact. Interaction with guards or other prisoners was forbidden. Prisoners were fed through trap doors and referred to by numbers. The thinking was, having nothing else to do but reflect on their misdeeds, prisoners would become penitent. They'd be given no books except the Bible. The only words they heard were hellfire and brimstone sermons delivered by zealot preachers who roamed the corridors. Of course, this system did not always produce the results the Quakers intended. Many inmates housed in these joints would go insane. Clearly, these practices would, in today's legal climate, run into vigorous constitutional and human rights challenges. While there are no reliable statistics to tell us how effective the Quaker way was at lowering recidivism, we do know that it became the premier model of penology in early America for decades. The question for us today is, were the Quakers right? Is religion still the key component to the rehabilitation of criminals?

Prior to my own incarceration experience, I had no religious affiliation. Like many citizens of this so-called Christian nation, in practice I was spiritually Switzerland. I didn't harbor anti-God antagonism like Nietzsche, night witches, or communists do, but neither did I demonstrate any affinity for the Creator through faith, prayer, or church attendance. My family lived ten feet away from a house of worship, and still we never went. My mother would occasionally drop maxims about God, how He was this all-seeing dude who we needed to get right with, but that was the scope of our Sunday schooling. To us kids, God was a benevolent, nebulous watcher we knew of in theory, but had never met, like a father who worked for the foreign service. All that changed when they tossed me into a cell and discussions of the death penalty began. The iceberg of ignorance frozen around my mind for months burst apart. With white hot crystal clarity, I could finally see, not just how terrible my crimes were, but how wretched, how corrupt, how morally bankrupt I had been all my life. On the floor of my cell in the maximum security wing, I'd sob uncontrollably, writhe like a roach sprayed by Raid, and ask my benevolent, nebulous father what was the point of even letting me be born if a murderer is all I'd amount to. The guards let us out of our cells for four hours

a day, two in the morning and two at night. We passed the unlock periods with television, showers, phone calls, card games, coffee binging, and lies. It was the remaining 20 hours a day of lockdown time that made me desperate to seize upon any opportunity to wiggle out. One of those opportunities was Bible study. A volunteer chaplain came through on Wednesdays. about ten of us would attend. Though I was sick with guilt, it would be hasty to call me reformed. Like most of the criminals there, I was searching for God, not to have His person, but rather the employ of His power. Jails are bastions of this sort of superficial spirituality, whereby the desperate look to the Lord for an airlift out of their nightmare, like rats riding the wreckage of the Titanic. Each week, the study would be proceeding peacefully, until an argument would break out between the chaplain and a prisoner they called "Preacher". In every jail, penal colony, and detention center in America, there's a guy like Preacher. He knows the Bible better than Einstein knows Relativity. He's got theological degrees and certificates of ordination. He's so gifted and qualified, you almost wonder what injustice or judicial misconduct occurred to put him in here. Clearly, Preacher loved Jesus of Nazareth. He just loved crack cocaine alot more. The doctrinal debates between Preacher and the chaplain made me glad Preacher wasn't my cellmate. A week later, he was my cellmate. When he wasn't regaling me with hilarious crack tales, he was of course preaching. He preached while I did pushups. He preached while I was on the toilet. He preached while I was sound asleep. Whether I was receptive, which wasn't often, or whether I felt I might claw his eyes out if he said another word, he preached. About the only time he wasn't preaching was in his sleep. There, he'd tremble on his bunk, thrash violently back and forth, and have shouting matches in dreams with his wife Michelle. He once told me of a time when he was sitting in his garage, smoking crack and reading the Bible. Michelle was there doing laundry. For some odd reason, she chose that moment to confess that she'd cheated on him during his last prison bid. The preacher got so angry, he ripped the whole Bible in half and went on the crack binder that landed him in jail again. To me, he was this mad prophet with a tortured mind, one who seemed possessed by

both God and the devil. They fought while he slumbered for the hegemony over his soul. Eventually, all that preaching, pestering, and persistence bore a harvest. The words of the preacher burned through my chest like a firebrand and tattoo'd themselves on my heart. Tearfully, I called upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and asked Him to be my Savior. As bizarre as it sounds, God used a crackhead to convert me. Perhaps therein lay a parable about what could be achieved through me.

A number of famous and infamous Americans have found faith in prison. There've been Ex-pimps turned Civil Rights era icons like Malcolm X. There've been political figures such as Charles Colson, the Nixon WhiteHouse advisor who, post-Watergate, founded the evangelical prison ministry known as Prison Fellowship. There've been serial murderers such as David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam Killer, and Jeffrey Daumer who, before he was beaten to death by another inmate, supposedly repented of cannibalism and became a christian. There've even been athletes like Mike Tyson, and movies stars such as Robert Downey Jr. who've found God from the confines of a cell. Exposure, immersion, and concentration of spirituality, in a Siberia of estrangement have, as the Quakers well knew it could, led to the conversion of some of the most unlikeliest people on the planet. Throughout the gulag archipelago that is the California Department of Corrections, an iron island chain that consists of thirty-three prisons, you'll find not only Christians, Muslims, and Jews, but also Zen Buddhists, Wiccans, Native american Shamanists, and more. Prison chaplains, while they may personally adhere to one faith or another, are required by law to facilitate services for all faiths, much as a military chaplain might. As with most prison politics, religious participation inside usually falls along strictly ethnic lines. Islamic services are generally populated by the blacks, Catholic Mass for the Mexican Nationals, Zen Buddhism for the Asians, etcetera. Not a little stir has been caused by the sight of a "brotha" jumping into discussions of Thor during Odinist services, or an Indian from New Delhi reaching for the peace pipe of an Indian from North Dakota. Despite the diversity of religions in prison, religious faith is by no means encouraged, be it by other prisoners or the prison administration.

For one thing, faiths like Christianity and Buddhism, with their tenets of mercy and forgiveness of enemies can be a bit inconvenient in here, if not downright hazardous to your health. Rigid, Ghandian adherence to non-violence, in a place where violence is the lingua franca can make you the victim, not just of one aggressor, but of bystander aggressors who learn you won't lift a finger. Barbaric as it may be, the willingness to fight or kill, properly recognized by others, is sometimes the only deterrence you have in here. Another reason why religious faith inside is not encouraged is because California prisons are an ecosystem where gangs sit atop the food chain, and gangs need gang members. In prison, as in the Army, individuals fail, only teams survive. Whoever you run with in here, whoever has your back, that's your team, your gang, and often, your only means of survival. Karl Von Clausewitz famously talked about war being an extension of politics, and peace being maintained through the equilibrium of forces. It is when these forces become unequal that war breaks out. Prison gangs definitely understand Mr. Clausewitz, which is why manpower is their chief concern. Most prison riots are won, most political goals are achieved by virtue of having equal or superior forces on the yard. For this reason, every gang has an aggressive human resources department whereby recruitment and retention are of the utmost concern. Within this framework, gangmembers who have come to Jesus moments aren't just folks who've gone soft, they're national security threats. Every soldier who gets religion is one less soldier available on the prison's tiny geopolitical chessboard. Used to be, if a guy wanted to drop out of a gang to serve God, his homies would reluctantly say okay, then send two people to stab him. Times have changed a little. Now, religious conscientious objectors are acceptable, but their conversion has to be comprehensive. The Mexican Mafia, for example, permit their Christian drop-outs to stay on the yard, but they can't have any future hand in the politics or criminal enterprises that are always ongoing. I once knew a Christian they stabbed a hundred times on the yard for violating this policy.

Of all the religions on the yard, Christianity is the easiest to join, but the hardest

to actually live out. Unlike Buddha, Thor, Muhammed, or Krishna, Jesus doesn't pack parachutes for His followers. The command is simply to obey, come what may. A lot of incarcerated Christians I know, myself included, are trapped in a perpetual tug-of-war between being the men they used to be, and the men God is calling them to be. Under the banner of Christianity, I've laid hands on the sick, preached the Gospel to large crowds, forgiven enemies, and administered the Holy sacraments, yet while under the banner of Christianity, I've also had fights, handled weapons, drunk moonshine, gambled, cursed, and lusted. Many of my most fervent prayers were not for spiritual growth or enlightenment, but that God would get me out of some jam my foolishness had gotten me into. Time and space cannot hold the motherlode of episodes where I did something dumb, fully deserved destruction, and still He answered me.

After my conviction, they sent me to serve my life sentence at a series of prisons in Central California. At most of these places, the chapel stayed closed on account of riots and stabbings that kept us locked down. Even when we could attend, many chaplains would not show up, especially if it was football season. Some of the services would be canceled mid-service due to violent incidents that broke out on the yard, and some in the chapel itself. One of the best prison fights I ever saw jumped off in church while we were shaking hands to leave. Throughout my term, I've noticed the strong correlation that exists between the spiritual life of an incarcerated community, and the rate of violence inside. Yards that were rife with religious imposters, compromisers, and lukewarm, lazy clergy saw higher rates of riots, stabbings, and staff assaults. Yards where believers were zealous, sincere, and devoted to the ideals of their faith, no matter the faith, had higher rates of peace, positive programming, and racial harmony. While correlation by no means equals causation, one can't help but notice the difference. A 2005 Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion article suggests the practice of religion significantly reduces the chance of prisoners to engage in verbal or physical altercations, as well as increases the likelihood of reform after release.

One prison where this definitely proved to be true was the Centinela Desert Institute,

located in Blythe, California. I arrived there in December of 2013. From the opening song of the first Protestant service I attended, I noticed how different this place was. The chapel was packed to the point of standing room only, this during football season! If you got fifteen people to miss the games at previous prisons, it was a good Sunday. The worship music was professional and powerful. About a dozen inmate musicians and singers were directed by a worship leader who crooned, screamed, and dripped sweat like James Brown. The performance was infectious, turning an otherwise stoic, stonefaced group of thieves and killers into a hand raising, teary-eyed gospel choir. Also included in the service were inmate preachers who delivered eloquent, heart-stabbing sermons of the depth and quality you might only hear from seasoned pastors. The civilian volunteer chaplains who attended that day spoke from the pulpit about how blown away they were by the whole service. They lamented the lukewarmness with which a lot of churches out there worshipped, comparing them to old folks homes and funeral parlors. The services at Centinela were vibrant and jumping every week, including the Bible studies conducted on the yard at night. Prisoners older in the faith mentored the youth. Multiple self-help classes and 12-step programs were run out of the chapel. Prison Fellowship sponsored a university-level 4-year seminary program on Saturdays. The curriculum focused on systematic theology, homiletics, and hermeneutics, with an emphasis on ministry in urban or metropolitan communities. Partnerships prevailed between the chapel and the surrounding cities in regards to charity campaigns, instrument donations, and volunteer ministry. The brotherhood at Centinela discovered, nurtured, and forced me to display the gift I never knew I had for teaching and preaching. They put me through a rigorous apprenticeship whereby my conduct was scrutinized, my theological beliefs were vetted, and my work ethic was challenged. Having received the approval of the elders and the chaplain, they made me an inmate minister, a regular speaker at the pulpit, and a leader in the congregation. At Centinela, we made special meals for the yard, picked out Christmas presents to be delivered to children, and produced a monthly publication surrounding spiritual and social issues. Violence on the yard remained low. Participation in classes, cognitive behavioral therapies, and

drug programs was high. Centinela was one of the few prisons in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation(CDCR) where the inmate population, prison administration, chaplains, and local citizens were equally committed to the transformation of lives and the restoration of victimized communities through religion. Several men I served with there paroled from life sentences and became pastors of churches, managers of re-entry programs, and community organizers. Sadly, Centinela is the exception and not the rule.

Broadly speaking, funding for religious programming in California's prisons has steadily declined. Budget cuts wrought in the age of the Coronavirus, including the need for social distancing, have shut the doors of chapels throughout the state. Even before the pandemic, religious funding had been sliding further and further down the totem pole of budgetary priorities. I cannot help but feel the apathy and cynicism of many chaplains and prison administrators, recipients of air tight collective bargaining agreements which ensure they get paid and promoted regardless of performance, has also contributed to the decline. Some chaplains simply don't possess the passion to see the prisoners over which they preside be rehabilitated, mainly because, as state employees, preservation of their paycheck has superceded obedience to the tenets of their faith. In such a vaccum of spiritual leadership and initiative-taking, local communities disengage, creating a deficit of lay ministers willing to come inside. All of this is happening withing the domain of a godless, warrior-cop, anti-inmate culture which prevails among prison staff. This culture is the reason why, the longer I am here, the better I become, but the longer they work here, the worse they seem to become. Within this toxic sludge of hate and control, an ethos erroneously linked to their ability to survive inside, correctional staff, as a matter of policy, harass, dissuade, and degrade not only the families of inmates seeking entry to visit, but the religious volunteers who desire to minister in here as well. The CDCR has a complex system of rules, dress codes, parking and gate clearance procedures, most of which are written with Alice in Wonderland logic, ensuring officers have the discretion to deny entry to

whomever they wish, which they frequently do. The walls of California's prisons are thought to exist to keep the convicts in, but they're mostly there to keep the prying eyes of the public, media, and even government officials out. Without regular inspections by watch dog groups such as the San Francisco Bay Area based Prison Law Office, the frequent and egregious violations of the law by CDCR staff would remain completely concealed.

While the aforementioned problems are systemic and deeply rooted, they are not intractable. More can be done by legislators and CDCR brass to support the role religion plays in the stability of prison yards and the rehabilitative potential of its prisoners. If rehabilitation, rather than retribution, truly is the point of all this mass incarceration, and religion is proven to foster rehabilitation, budgetary committees must allocate more resources to religion. Increased funding is needed for chaplains, volunteers, infrastructure, instruments, books and programs. Chaplains and administrators with oversight of religious programming should be incentivized based upon how effective they are at expanding religious engagement. While states cannot constitutionally sponsor one religion over another, they can be more proactive in establishing faith opportunities across the spectrum. At many of the institutions in California, Chaplains don't, or are prevented from, touring housing units, visiting the sick, or making religious literature available. Some chaplains completely sub-contract services to volunteers. If these volunteers can't make it in for whatever reason, there are no services. This should never happen. Furthermore, local communities are the most important stakeholders when it comes to the rehabilitation of criminals, because today's inmate is tomorrow's neighbor. Taking an interest in the spiritual transformation of criminals therefore, isn't a religious freedom issue, it's a public safety issue. There are a lot of good people in society who want to come into prisons to help, they want to contribute, but they don't know how. Correctional Systems, such as the CDCR need to streamline the red tape required for these folks to come in, that is, if the department really does care about rehabilitation as much as their press releases claim. The cynical side of me believes prison industrial complexes such as the one which exists in California don't truly advocate rehabilitation because they can't. As a slogan, rehabilitation is

politically popular these days, but in practice it's financially and fundamentally antithetical to their business model. The continued usefulness of prison employees depends on a firehose influx of felons. It's simple supply and demand. The more inmates you have, the more correctional staff you need. The less inmates you have, the less correctional staff you can afford to keep. If rehabilitation were to become too successful, and recidivism were to lower too much, it could lead to budget cuts, furloughs, lay-offs, and forced retirements in the Department of Corrections. Crime, contrary to that old saying, truly does pay. Too much rehabilitation makes the correctional officer an endangered species. This truth is the reason why prisons are so violent, corrupt, and failed as a social experiment.

If a man in prison truly wishes to be rehabilitated, he's got to rehabilitate himself. Religion is an incredible tool in that pursuit. The Quakers believed in the power of religion to change lives, and I am a witness to that power. Many of the leaders of tomorrow are cloaked in the darkness of a cell. They are studying, praying, submitting to the eternal voice of the One who, in every generation, has matched tough times with tough people, usually finding the people where other people are not looking for them. For the castaway, the exile, the criminal, this is a reason to have hope. Religion has fundamentally transformed me from an ignorant, incorrigible, narcissistic punk kid who actually thought it was okay to rob and shoot people as long as I got what I wanted, into a just, upright, and faithful man who serves others, and even sacrifices for them. I do not know what the future holds for me, but I do know that I can teleport into tomorrow with courage and confidence, because I've become a co-worker and a comrade of the One who holds the future.