

Confronting Christian Penal Charity: Neoliberalism and the Rebirth of Religious Penitentiaries

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When historians talk of the cultural forces which have influenced penal policy, the forces which they have in mind are most often religion and humanitarianism. (Garland 1990,203)

EFFORTS TO REDUCE TAXPAYER SPENDING ON PRISONS HAVE FEATURED expanded use of private for-profit corporations as well as increased use of voluntary service organizations, particularly faith-based programs seeking offenders' self-transformation (Hannah-Moffat 2000). In an effort to end the government monopoly on delivery of services in criminal justice, a new level of both market competition and structural charity has become an increasingly commonplace feature of correctional budgeting (see Hackworth 2012, 45–46; Hallett 2006; Tomczak 2016). In an as yet little-explored dimension of carceral devolution, the trend of privately funded Christian seminaries being planted in US prisons reflects a growing prominence of religious neoliberalism in US corrections (see Hackworth 2012, Hallett et al. 2016, Miller 2014). Due to widespread reliance by corrections officials upon faith-based charities to deliver cost-effective services to prisoners and ex-offenders, faith-based resources are increasingly the sole or best-resourced programs available for inmates (Erzen 2017, Hackworth 2012, Sullivan 2009, Tomczak 2016).

Federal revocation of Pell Grant eligibility for convicted felons in 1994 has produced a market opportunity for enrollment growth among Chris-

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tian education service providers sponsoring collegiate degree programs inside US prisons, wherein public officials often simultaneously employ or endorse an exclusively sectarian framing of offender rehabilitation.¹ Seminaries frequently use their prison course offerings for fundraising and self-promotion purposes. In what is fast becoming a nationwide movement, Christian seminary programs are now operating in 17 states, often providing the only or largest tuition-assisted access to collegiate-level education available to prisoners at the institutions in which they are housed. This article offers the first broad and systematic exploration of collegiate-level religious education and penal regime change involving multiple US prison seminaries (for earlier research, see Duwe et al. 2015; Hallett et al. 2016, 2017, 2019; Jang et al. 2017).

Penal Regime Change and the American Penitentiary

The first religiously inscribed penitentiary in the United States comprised a pod of experimental cells built within the confines of the Walnut Street Jail over two centuries ago.² Since then, religious volunteers have continuously been active in jails and prisons, more often than not finding themselves in conflict with prison administrators and often marginalized by wardens and chaplains (Graber 2013, Sundt & Cullen 1998). As Jennifer Graber (2013, 3) notes in her history of New York's Auburn Penitentiary, "the prison's first decades show that just as the nation began to reform its criminal justice system and build institutions for reformatory incarceration, citizens had no clear sense of how religious actors might contribute to that process." Graber highlights the contested nature of religion at both Auburn and Sing Sing, another New York prison, amid persistent tension between officials and religious reformers.

Not only were religious volunteers often kept at bay by prison administrators, religionists themselves were in conflict over religious doctrine and over who among them should hold leadership positions in prison ministry. Although religiously motivated volunteerism in US prisons had the effect of lending religious legitimacy to penal regimes, it also failed to result in the reforms often advocated by religious practitioners. Religious volunteers, in fact, have generally had little influence over what religionists viewed as excessively punitive policies in early penitentiaries (i.e., use of the yoke and water torture). Although it persisted for reasons of access and piety, religious influence on US corrections throughout history has been greatly exaggerated:

In order to secure a place in the prison experiment, Protestants articulated a united front about religion's contribution to reformatory incarceration. They argued that religion played a crucial role in inmate reformation and in guiding the development of penal institutions. If and when they were welcomed into prisons, however, they struggled. (Graber 2013, 5)

The Political Economy of New Religious Prisons: Neoliberalism and Mass Incarceration

Like David Rothman's parallel account of the *Discovery of the Asylum* in the USA, Ignatieff located the birth of the penitentiary in the search for a new form of social order in the early decades of the nineteenth century, following the breakdown of the traditional ties of localism, the growth of city populations, and the emergence of capitalist social relations. . . . Consequently, his account of the penitentiary's emergence places it firmly within a new logic of class relations and a corresponding new set of strategies and institutions for managing the poor. (Garland 1990, 125)

Although religious volunteers are often credited with the development of the early US penitentiary system, structural forces involving the rise of industrial capitalism better explain the penitentiary's haphazard evolution. According to Ignatieff (1977, 3), "a range of forces" including the collapse of "feudal retinues, enclosure and eviction of cottagers, and the steady pressure of population growth on a small and overstocked free labor market" brought about the rise of the penitentiary (see also Ignatieff 1981). Even to this day, understanding the spectrum of influences at work in penitentiaries requires a detailed examination of both penal philosophy and the specific regimes within individual institutions (site by site). With regard to religion itself, criminologist David Green (2013, 126) refers to the seminal work of Swidler and Melossi to warn against overemphasizing the impact religion had on the birth of the prison: "Echoing Swidler (1986), Melossi (2001, 403) rightly cautions that linkages between religious beliefs and penal policies should not be considered causally deterministic; instead, religious beliefs are components of 'conceptual and rhetorical toolkits' that shape penal orientations, often in inconsistent ways."

Insofar as Christian seminaries have recently come to dominate tuition-assisted collegiate educational opportunities in US corrections, the reinscription of prisons as an appropriate venue for immersive religious education

corresponds with the rise of mass incarceration.³ Faith-based voluntarism has become a contemporary staple of rehabilitative services in the United States, especially among jurisdictions striving to shrink government through expanded privatization and direct use of volunteer service organizations (Buck Willison et al. 2010, Hallett 2006, Hannah-Moffat 2000). As under-resourced prisons increasingly rely upon religious volunteerism for providing services to inmates, research on the impact of faith-based programming has not kept pace with the full range of emerging programs. As researchers at the Urban Institute recently put it, in the public sector of criminal justice

[r]esource-strapped policymakers and criminal justice practitioners are increasingly turning to the faith community to help meet the multiple needs of the roughly 700,000 individuals released annually from the nation's prisons. Although faith-based organizations have long served disadvantaged individuals, including prisoners, only a handful of studies have examined the effectiveness of faith-based efforts to improve prisoner reentry and reduce recidivism. Even fewer studies have attempted to identify the distinguishing characteristics of "faith-related" programs. (Buck Willison et al. 2010, 1)

Research on the impacts of faith-based programs in prisons must be prioritized. By implying that faith-based organizations offer better results than similar programs sponsored by nonsectarian organizations, proponents of faith-based programs rely upon claims of superior performance based on morality and caring—and the fact that these services are often delivered by volunteers at no cost. Religious volunteer organizations frequently offer unique resources to prisoners and prisons; however, their utilization inside prisons can have unintended legal consequences (Sullivan 2009). Due to growing reliance by prison officials on religious charity for inmate programming, religious volunteers increasingly find themselves to be the sole providers available for this marginalized population (Hackworth 2012). As part of the neoliberal shift away from welfare state spending on behalf of needy populations enacted under the charitable choice provisions authorized by President Bill Clinton, faith-based charities are now routinely identified as a fiscal and human capital resource for achieving both improved rehabilitation and cost-effective budgeting (Boden 2006; Degan & Teles 2012, 2014; Fields 2005; Hallett 2006). The 2001 legislation authorizing the nation's first and largest entirely faith-based prison, Florida's Lawtey Correctional

Institution, demonstrates the pairing of fiscal conservatism and private spirituality in the correctional context (see Hallett 2006, chapter 5):

Whereas, faith-based organizations are “armies of compassion” devoted to changing individuals’ hearts and lives and can offer cost-effective substance abuse treatment through the use of volunteers and other cost saving measures, and Whereas research has proven that one-on-one private and faith-based programming is often more effective than government programs in shaping and reclaiming lives because they are free to assert the *essential connection between responsibility and human dignity*; their approach is personal, not bureaucratic; their service is not primarily a function of professional background, but of individual commitment; and they inject an element of moral challenge and spiritual renewal that government cannot duplicate and Whereas, in an effort to transform lives and break the personally destructive and expensive recidivism cycle, Florida should increase the number of chaplains who strengthen volunteer participation and expand the pilot [faith-based] dormitory program that includes a voluntary faith component that supports inmates as they reenter communities. Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida. (Preamble, 2001 Florida Criminal Rehabilitation Act 2001 Fl. ALS 110; 2001 Fla. Laws ch. 110; 2001 Fla. SB 912; emphasis added)

Method

Recent calls for expanded religious engagement in correctional programming occurred in the United States at a time of broader shifts in economic and social relations; these shifts, in turn, corresponded with alterations to US welfare policies that heavily affected prisons (Wacquant 2002). Amid a broad “dismantling of the welfarist paradigm of social regulation,” public assistance programs for social uplift were replaced with punitive workfare mandates tying gainful employment to parole eligibility and offender rehabilitation (De Giorgi & Fleury-Steiner 2017, 1; Miller 2014; Wacquant 2002). As an example of carceral devolution, the planting of Christian seminaries reflects the broader use of religious neoliberalism in social welfare policy writ large (Hackworth 2012, Miller 2014). At present, 17 states have active prison seminary programs in operation or active development: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Louisiana, Texas, and Wisconsin (see Hallett et al. 2019).

Table 1. Prisons and prison seminaries examined

Host Prison	Sponsoring Christian Seminary
Louisiana State Penitentiary - Angola	New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
Mississippi State Penitentiary - Parchman	New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
Hardee Correctional Institution - Florida DOC	New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
Handlon Correctional Facility - Michigan DOC	Calvin College & Calvin Seminary
Sing Sing - NY Department of Corrections & Community Supervision	New York Theological Seminary
Darrington Correctional Institution - Texas Department of Criminal Justice	Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Using both on-site and archival research exploring operational practices at six US prisons, this article critiques the role of Christian seminaries as a function of religious neoliberalism in American corrections. Specifically, this article reviews practices at established prison seminaries in six states: Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, Florida, Michigan, and New York (see Table 1).⁴ The article highlights the prototype prison seminary at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola (hereafter “Angola”), while profiling several spin-off programs that reference Angola’s seminary as their prototype.

Linking Free Education to Inmate Religious Labor: Inmate Ministry

All Christian seminary programs examined below offer tuition-free and privately funded collegiate-level degree programs with university-level coursework; however, two (Louisiana and Texas) also have labor expectations explicitly attached to seminary matriculation, and their graduates will become inmate ministers or field ministers. All programs reviewed here operate with varying degrees of supplemental administrative support from state departments of correction for visiting seminaries, including collaborative efforts at cohort recruitment and the placement of graduate ministers, missionaries, and field ministers inside additional state prisons (see Hallett et al. 2016, 2019). One little-explored feature of carceral devolution involves the rise of state departments of correction utilizing inmate labor for specialized work assignments inside prisons. Whereas, in the past, prison institutions would have employed outside counselors, literacy coaches, teachers, and chaplains, today the inmates themselves are increasingly being drafted into these specialized roles at little or no cost (Kaufman 2015).

Since the founding of the Angola prison seminary in the aftermath of the revocation of Pell Grant eligibility for convicted felons in 1994, a number of spin-off Angola model prison seminary programs have developed nationwide (Duwe et al. 2015). Given the relative poverty and isolation of US prisons—and the growing presence of Christian seminary programs lining up to serve them—Christian higher educational providers have already dramatically shaped prison practice in several high-profile instances (Hennessy-Fixe 2016).⁵

Because Angola seminary graduates are placed directly into inmate-run churches and serve in pastoral roles after graduation, Angola's seminary requires a full academic minor in grief counseling and conflict management. New York Theological Seminary's religious education program, offered at Sing Sing prison and founded in 1982, is the nation's oldest self-described prison seminary. However, this program offers only a graduate-level Master of Professional Studies degree, featuring neither inmate-run churches nor any formally assigned religious work requirement from inmates upon graduation. Though students at Sing Sing and three other programs examined here (Handlon, Hardee, Parchman) may lead prayer in corporate settings, they are authorized to do so only as private individuals rather than as part of any prison-assigned duties. Only Angola (Louisiana) and Darrington (Texas) currently have in-prison religious work assignments required of prison seminary graduates upon matriculation. Additionally, no applicants to the prison seminary programs examined here are required to be adherents of any particular faith or to affiliate with any specific religious doctrine as a condition of admittance. At Angola and Darrington, the expectation is that graduates will undertake religious work after graduation, but seminary graduates who do this religious work are perversely not required to express adherence to a religious faith as a condition of admission to the program.⁶

Finally, although numerous programs around the country bill themselves (after Angola) as prison seminaries, Angola currently offers the only authentic seminary in the sense that it is the only program graduating credentialed ministers into functioning churches—all with unique polities, constitutions, doctrinal affiliations, and charters. All the seminary institutions sponsoring prison education programs examined here offer coursework that is fully accredited and transferable to numerous public institutions of higher education in math, science, English, biblical languages, and general education. In short, in the educational desert that is the US prison system, Christian higher education programming is often the only available option—even as it is sometimes offered with the expectation of subsequent religious labor from

inmates and the de facto endorsement of sectarian rehabilitation regimes undertaken on behalf of the prison by seminary graduates.⁷

Past as Prologue: Structural Charity and the Return of Religious Penitentiaries

At stake in this new configuration of welfare, is something rather different from the simple privatization of welfare threatened by long-standing libertarian critics. What we have witnessed over the last 10 to 15 years is not a return to private charity as it existed before the New Deal, but rather the implementation of a form of *structural charity*—structural in the sense that it is abetted by the state, but charitable in the sense that it retains the discretionary, unpredictable and ad-hoc nature of private philanthropy. (Cooper 2015, 65; emphasis in original)

Louisiana State Penitentiary, located in Angola, Louisiana, is America's largest maximum-security prison, housing over 6,300 inmates in five separate complexes spread over 18,000 acres of a working prison farm. Cellblock and dormitory units are still called "camps" at Angola, a remnant of the traditional assignment of slaves to work camps across various locations of the property, a former slave plantation (Carleton 1971, 89). The property first became known as Angola because it was this region of Africa that supplied its slaves. The name stuck. Roughly 75 percent of inmates currently serving time at Angola are serving life sentences (Hallett et al. 2016). A life sentence in Louisiana currently means natural life, expiring only upon the inmate's death (Nellis 2010, 28). The average sentence for non-lifers at Angola in 2014, however, was 92.7 years. As of this writing (spring 2017), roughly 90 percent of the inmates sentenced to Angola will die there (see Hallett et al. 2016, 2017).

In the aftermath of the federal government's revocation of Pell Grant eligibility for convicted felons in 1994, Angola Warden Burl Cain feared that elimination of this collegiate educational resource was uniquely harmful to his prison. Angola had long been one of the most violent prisons in America and still retains the distinction of being America's toughest prison in terms of sentence length. Collegiate education programs are among the few personal enrichment programs available to Angola's prisoners. Fearing an increase in violence and regretting the loss of this resource for his men, Cain reached out to New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) administrators to explore the possibility of their offering some minimal collegiate-level coursework as a gift to the prison.

Deeply embedded in its history, religious practice at Angola dates to the prison's earliest days as a slave plantation. Recent interviews of Angola's longest-surviving inmates and staff, a few of whom have spent the majority of their long lives at the prison after first arriving around 1950, contend that inmate worship at the prison dates back to convict leasing and before. One inmate, who first arrived at Angola in 1957 as a young man, described "old timers worshiping and praying when I got here." Another long-serving warden, himself born and raised on "the farm," confirmed that "religion has always been at Angola" (see Hallett et al. 2016, 60–63). Angola's informal inmate religious communities were expanded into formal congregations in the aftermath of a 1974 federal consent decree finding conditions at the prison that "shocked the conscience of any right-thinking person" (Rideau & Sinclair 1985, 1073). After the federal intervention, religious practice at Angola was identified as one of the few resources immediately available to and preferred by inmates, with prisoners thereafter being encouraged to turn what had been described as informal inmate-led religious clubs into active churches—and so they did, forming Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic, Methodist, and other Christian worship communities, collectively referred to today as the "Angola church." Several inmate-built churches and even two Catholic chapels exist on the grounds of the prison today (Hallett et al. 2016). Inmate-led churches provided opportunities for inmate leadership and autonomy in the aftermath of a period of well-documented prison neglect (Rideau & Sinclair 1985).

Overcoming initial reservations after learning about Angola's inmate-run churches, NOBTS administrators concluded that providing educational services to the prison fell within their mission. After first offering a few classes, NOBTS soon planted a fully functioning Christian seminary on the grounds of Angola—recruiting inmate students directly from Angola's inmate population and graduating trained ministers for its inmate-run churches of various denominations (Hallett et al. 2016). At its own cost, NOBTS has run this tuition-free program for Angola inmates since 1995.

Priding themselves on the direct overlap between Angola's seminary program and that offered by NOBTS in the outside world, graduates of Angola's prison seminary go on to lead congregations at the prison just as they do in the free world. With training in grief counseling, conflict management, expository preaching, and biblical languages, Angola's inmate ministers are deployed throughout the prison—serving not only as church leaders but also as literacy coaches, grief counselors, hospice orderlies, funeral directors at the prison cemetery, chaplain's assistants, and seminary tutors. Importantly, the

position of inmate minister at Angola long predates the NOBTS seminary. In fact, it had become commonplace for correctional staff to rely upon the prison's unique inmate religious leadership, assigning inmate ministers by memorandum on an ad hoc basis to serve particular inmates in distress.

Governed by a personalist ethic of what they call "relationship theology," Angola's inmate ministers strive to serve both staff and their fellow inmates through focused attention to interpersonal relationships. Given the chronic underfunding of prisons in Louisiana, the widespread use of inmate labor of all kinds is commonplace throughout the state. Upon graduation and as part of their explicitly religious work assignment, Angola's inmate ministers are granted prison-issued "Offender Minister" ID cards featuring the Louisiana state seal and, by possession of such identification, they can traverse the grounds of Angola doing prison-assigned ministerial work (see Hallett et al. 2016, 2017, 2019).

Over the space of the past 20 years, approximately 30 graduates of Angola's Christian seminary have also been sent to other Louisiana prisons, serving as missionaries from Angola by leading inmate worship and working as chaplain's orderlies. As with inmates in the other prison seminary programs examined here, Angola's seminary graduates often find themselves to be among the most educated individuals at their prisons: More than 60 percent of Angola staff have only a high school or GED equivalency, and the majority of inmates themselves have far less than that.⁸

Though civil libertarians and legal scholars have long questioned the constitutionality of the prison-supported inmate ministry at Angola, the relative poverty and isolation of the prison has left potential outside litigants reluctant to take legal action, deciding that leaving Angola's religious practices unchallenged would be a lesser evil than taking this unique resource from the prisoners (see Bergeron 2011, Childs 2013). As legal scholar Douglas Roy (2005, 833) posits with regard to correctional reliance upon faith-based programs, "While the state is not paying for these services, it has entangled itself in a dependent relationship with religious groups by providing them the audience and means to carry out their mission in exchange for relief from its duty to provide necessary correctional programming to prisoners." In all cases examined here, seminary officials working inside prisons and inmate seminarians themselves (let alone inmate ministers and field ministers) differ from state-paid chaplains in that the rules governing their work inside a public institution remain largely undefined, representing a new form of religious deregulation and privatization in the US correctional environment.

In short, according to the director of the Louisiana American Civil Liberties Union, the revocation of Pell Grant eligibility in 1994 left Angola structurally dependent upon the religious charity of NOBTS for continued access to higher education resources, leading the organization to conclude that litigating the constitutionality of Angola's Christian seminary would ultimately be inhumane, rendering its inmates even more destitute than before. "While the religious character of the education program at Angola troubles some, many see it as better than nothing," Marjorie Esman, Executive Director of the ACLU in Louisiana, recently stated: "I think that what Burl Cain calls moral rehabilitation is, in his mind, religious doctrine, but a lot of good has come of it.... I think it's unfortunate that the only college available is a Christian one, but the fact that a college is there at all is important" (Childs 2013, 2).

Although a full analysis of the constitutionality of prison seminaries is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment both limits and protects the practice of religious faith in American prisons (see Bergeron 2011; Branham 2004, 2005, 2008). Even though inmates under state supervision retain a constitutionally protected right to practice religion, correctional administrators are bound by constitutional restrictions regarding both how they accommodate inmates' religious preferences and how they deploy religious resources. That is, although prison administrators are required to accommodate diverse religious practices, they must not in the process of that accommodation, for example, privilege Christianity over Islam or Judaism, nor in any way be seen to be promoting a religious orthodoxy. In its efforts to accommodate inmates' religious predilections, the state must retain neutrality in its relationship to religion itself (see Sullivan 2009). The planting of privately funded but administratively supported and sanctioned Christian seminaries inside US prisons complicates issues of religious establishment (for a deeper exploration of these matters see Hallett et al. 2019).

Black Prophecy: A Racially Informed Counternarrative to Punitive Justice

As noted above, Angola's inmate-run churches are a result of its unique history as a prison farm and a slave plantation (for more, see Hallett et al. 2016). In fact, religious faith at Angola has long been a source of spiritual resistance and self-definition for its captives. Like at its Mississippi counter-

part, Parchman Farm, inmate worship at Angola dates as far back as anyone can remember. Because prison staff frequently lived on the compound of Southern penitentiaries, church buildings for free people were often also made available to inmates for holding separate worship services of their own. Frequent intermixing of staff and inmates during open religious services, such as revivals, was also commonplace. Within these mixed religious settings, chaplains and inmate preachers often coproduced and experienced religious worship services together, transcending boundaries that were far more rigid outside the prison. Religious practice offered a measure of autonomy in the prison that would not have existed otherwise, with the mantle of religion offering a platform from which cohesive Black identities could be nurtured and given space, both literally and figuratively. The Black church existed “from within the epicenter of white brutality,” explains W.E.B. Du Bois, standing as “the only autonomous institution in the black community” (Du Bois 1903, xv–xvi).

Despite being constrained by the dominant power relations of slavery and later the economic engine of convict leasing, the attraction of Judeo-Christian metaphors for prison abolitionism and civil rights advocacy is well documented: “If one wishes to understand the black experience, one must understand the religious, economic, political, social, and cultural roles of the organized black church” (ibid., xix). On plantations and in later urban ghettos, the Black church came to play both sacred and secular roles, providing spiritual as well as economic, educational, and political support. Du Bois highlights the centrality of the Black church as it “challenged white culture to adhere to Christian principles of brotherhood, which, if followed, would undermine the politics of white racism” (ibid.). As theologian Howard Thurman put it:

The striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and the vast majority of American negroes is obvious to anyone that tarries long over the facts.... The result has been a tendency to be their own protectors, to bulwark themselves against careless and deliberate aggression. Living in a climate of deep insecurity, Jesus, faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees, had to find some other basis upon which to establish a sense of well-being. He knew that the goals of religion as he understood them could never be worked out within the then-established order. (Thurman 1949, 24)

Wounded Healers: Trauma-Informed Inmate Ministry in US Prisons

At Angola, Elder Samuel Starks and Pastor Jimmy Robinson are among the oldest Black inmate religious leaders serving time. Neither are graduates of Angola's seminary program, however, arriving decades prior to its conceptualization. Samuel Starks first served time at Angola in 1957, subsequently receiving a life sentence to the farm in 1965. Describing himself as spiritually devout, at the time of our interview in 2015 Starks had been observing or practicing faith at Angola for nearly 60 years. Starks currently serves as elder of the Angola inmate congregation St. John the Baptist Brotherhood, having been a member since 1979. Jimmy Robinson, still vibrant and physically fit at age 72, arrived at Angola in 1983. His self-described "spiritual journey" involved first serving as associate pastor and then senior pastor of the inmate-led New Destiny Fellowship Church at Angola, serving approximately 80 inmates. Starks and Robinson are described by inmates as the leaders of the Black inmate church at Angola.⁹

Both Starks and Robinson describe the implementation of the prison seminary as transformative for Angola, but this transformation took place only gradually. Robinson asserts that "the Body of Christ was here before the seminary, but it was weak and malnourished. Today it's not that: the seminary curriculum we get is the very same as they get on the outside." As late as the early 1990s, all of Angola's prison chaplains were white, serving an 85 percent Black prison. As inmate religious leader Sydney Deloch put it: "I think it's a sad injustice to have a predominantly Black prison, one of the largest in the country, and not one Black chaplain on staff" (Hallett et al. 2016, 7). By matriculating roughly 250 mostly Black seminary graduates over 20 years, the Angola prison seminary partially remedied an acutely resented racial imbalance among chaplaincy staff in creating Angola's unique inmate minister program, addressing what Angola's inmate-run prison newspaper, *The Angolite*, characterized as a cultural injustice:

Deloch encapsulated the feelings of a large segment of the population when he said, "I think the chaplain's department has a bad outreach program. I think it's due to a cultural barrier. Because if you come up with a silver spoon in your mouth you can't know me. You can't know my problems. You can't understand me. And even if you live next door to me, if you're white, you can't know me." (Glover 1992, 2; see also Glover 1995)

When asked what would happen to the Angola church if the seminary were closed down, inmates Starks and Robinson recoiled at the suggestion, with Robinson resolutely stating, “Well, short-term, nothing. The church today is standing on its own two feet. So we would just have to redouble our efforts. Over time, though, it would probably hurt us, definitely be a loss.” As described by inmates, the Angola church and prison seminary offer refuge and a counternarrative to the dehumanizing treatment inmates report experiencing at the prison. Drawing on inmate concerns about the racial makeup of Angola’s chaplaincy and the history of Angola itself, corporate religious worship fosters a sense of identity and community that disrupts the daily routine of counts, bed checks, and institutionalized discipline at most prisons. Despite the fact that prison religion is often caricatured in disparaging ways, religious practice at Angola offers an alternative to destructive aspects of prison life. Inmates report finding great rehabilitative value in being asked to give back to the prison through religious service. Religious conversion also gives many inmates a new way to address painful memories of life before prison, a way that is healing rather than condemnatory. As Angola’s seminary director put it:

The church at Angola de-institutionalizes the dehumanization of punitive justice—because the church gives a man the responsibility of making the right choices for the right reasons. Whereas dehumanization within a punitive system demands simply making choices for the wrong reasons—because they fear punishment.

In sum, to simply condemn inmate religiosity in US prisons is overly simplistic and academically shallow. Angola’s unique history of inmate-run churches played a pivotal role in the establishment of what became its spate of unique inmate-run programs as well as its prototype seminary. Key differences between Angola’s seminary and those that came later, however, make it unlikely that future prison seminaries will offer the same racially informed counternarrative and critique of punitivism found at Angola. In a biographical essay by Angola inmate Robert Hyde, shared and used here with the author’s permission, the seminary plays the unique and important role of putting the emotional pain suffered by inmates at the center of its curriculum: “Everyone in prison has PTSD: your crime, arrest, imprisonment, etc are all traumas. The seminary acknowledges that and the seminary’s teachings here healed me on many levels” (Hyde 2015, 21).

Hyde continues:

While prisons seek to make “other” of the criminal, using the death blow of a life sentence as a form of sacrificial, retributive cleansing of society’s pain, the vengeance becomes cloaked in false justice. This realization allowed me to more fully avail myself of the healing of Jesus Christ at the Cross and gave me clarity into the fact that I was permanently condemning myself as evil, when in fact I was merely absorbing the projections of the state. (Hyde 2015, 22)

Beyond the Angola Prototype: The Cottage Industry in Prison Seminaries

Whereas Angola’s prison seminary came about quite by accident, as a result of the federally imposed loss of Pell Grant eligibility and the ad hoc attempt by its warden to provide at least some collegiate-level educational opportunities for its inmates, newer Christian seminaries operating in prisons have very different local histories. The Angola seminary’s ties to its unique inmate-run churches vest its student body with a unique authority over the program. If Pell Grant eligibility had not been abolished and Angola’s preexisting inmate-run churches had not already existed at the prison, the seminary program would never have been established. Thus, in regard to Christian seminaries operating in US prisons, what started out as a service project has quickly become a cottage industry: Prison ministry in this context serves as a lucrative source of advertising as well as its own form of evangelism. Most prison seminaries today run far smaller cohorts than found at Angola and with entirely different cost structures. In short, what has come after differs from what came first. Outside of Angola, Christian seminary programs operating in US prisons are not driven by inmate-led programming but are directed wholly by prison administrators and religious penal entrepreneurs. Although the seminary run by Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary at Darrington Correctional Institution in Texas matriculates graduates who become field ministers in 19 satellite prisons, Texas forbids the establishment of programs that empower one inmate over another and has resisted calls for allowing inmates to operate their own religious programming (Duwe et al. 2015). All other seminary programs examined for this research beyond Angola have not sought to establish formal inmate congregations nor inmate ministries with their graduates, citing explicit prohibitions from their sponsoring state departments of correction. Although the Angola prison seminary was established after prison officials sought assistance from re-

religious educators who were close to the prison, at other prisons it was the seminary leaders who first approached the prisons.¹⁰

Conclusion: Neoliberalism and the Rebirth of Religious Penitentiaries

Influential arguments have also been made concerning the overlaps and convergences between the modern prison and other “institutions” such as the monastery, nunnery, reformatory, workhouse, plantation, slavery, asylum, hospital, factory, school, army barracks, boot camp, concentration camp, immigration detention center, Jim Crow regime and black ghetto. (Scott 2013, 301)

An axiom in the sociology of punishment is that the history of prison regimes explicitly mirrors, in surprising and persistent ways, broader shifts in economic social relations (Garland 1990). Historians of the prison emphasize changing economic modes of production and how these relate to dramatic shifts in prevailing strategies for punishment (Simon 2002). Durkheim emphasized how the emerging division of labor in industrial capitalism weakened social solidarity to bring about a rise in individualistic punishments; Foucault highlighted the birth of the prison amid the rise of market-focused technologies of the soul in the penitentiary itself; and Dario Melosi and Massimo Pavarini, in *The Prison and the Factory: Origins of the Penitentiary System*, identified the penitentiary system not as a point of simple confinement or observation but as a venue for cultivating a monastic-like work ethic for congregate factories.

A heightened responsabilization rhetoric dismissive of racism and structural inequality has been used, in part, to justify the planting of Christian seminaries in US prisons and constitutes an important development for research and public policy (Hannah-Moffat 2000). At the same time, the delegation of higher education to Christian service providers and inmates themselves has created occasional spaces for religious counternarratives to the prison, emphasizing structural oppression and eschatological critique of carceral trends. Prisons and prison programming are intensely contested spaces, in constant evolution from within and without (Graber 2013).

As historically contested sites of religiosity, prisons must remain accessible to the full range of both secular and religious stakeholders for the broadest successful impact upon inmates. Overreliance upon religious structural charity, at least in terms of providing access to higher education for prisoners, has thus far uniquely privileged Christian educational institutions in ways that may violate the constitution. Revocation of Pell Grant eligibility for convicted felons in 1994 is still the most frequent rationale used by prisons to justify

the installation of on-site prison seminaries. More importantly, given that the vast majority of inmates in US prisons lack access to meaningful higher education, overreliance upon Christian voluntarism for education resources perpetuates and reifies the overall abandonment of inmates by the state while ensconcing religious neoliberalism inside (Hackworth 2012). Amid efforts to dismantle mass incarceration as a whole, Pell Grant eligibility should be expanded to include all convicted felons and inmates serving time in US prisons, and a full menu of human enrichment programs of all kinds should be fully funded and made available to prisoners.

NOTES

1. While attending a graduation ceremony for the Darrington Correctional Institution prison seminary, Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick stated to the public assembly: "Maybe the next great revival is starting in our prisons. The only way we can change the hearts of men is through the power of Jesus Christ" (Grissom 2016).

2. See François-Alexandre-Frédéric de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *On the Prisons of Philadelphia, by an European* (Philadelphia: Moreau de Saint-Mery, 1796).

3. Prison seminary students are often selectively administered in sequestered cohorts, matriculating and working together through the intensive coursework of their seminary training, and spending literally years working together in classrooms and extracurricular programming.

4. Portions of this research that involved human subjects were approved by Institutional Review Boards at the University of North Florida and Baylor University, IRB Project #49899. The six programs examined were: Angola (Louisiana State Penitentiary), Parchman (Mississippi State Penitentiary), Darrington Unit (Texas), Hardee Correctional Institution (Florida), Sing Sing (New York), and Handlon Correctional Facility (Michigan).

5. The Bard Prison Initiative, sponsored by Bard College in New York, runs the largest single secular prison higher education program, enrolling 300 total students per year. The Bard College program offers secular and tuition-free undergraduate courses to inmates in New York state prisons and with consortium partners in Iowa, Washington, Connecticut, Maryland, Indiana, and Missouri. By comparison, the Angola prison seminary alone currently has 150 enrolled. The combined student population of the six programs examined for this research is approximately 450.

6. A frequent source of frustration cited by inmate seminary graduates in Texas involves the state criminal justice department's reluctance to allow inmate-led congregations like those at Angola. Statutory prohibition of policies that allow for one inmate having any sort of potentially coercive power over another have prevented the establishment of inmate-led churches in Texas and elsewhere (see Duwe et al. 2015).

7. In earlier research exploring the experience of prison seminary graduates, multiple non-Christian and nonreligious inmates stated openly that they entered the seminary simply "to get the education" rather than because of a desire for religious training, highlighting the importance of courses in world history, English literature, and psychology as the "most interesting" to them personally (see Hallett et al. 2016, 224).

8. Inmates repeatedly express a preference for discussing personal problems with fellow inmates as opposed to prison chaplains or counselors.

9. “Angola church” is a colloquial term widely used at the prison in reference to “the collective ecumenical body of Christian believers at Angola” (Dr. John Robson, Angola Seminary Director).

10. Though the New York Theological Seminary (NYTS) program was established in 1982, before Angola’s, it was also founded as a service project, beginning with a few classes and expanding over time. The NYTS program at Sing Sing, however, though nominally calling itself a seminary, offers neither a formal divinity degree nor inmate-run churches at the institution.

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