

Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons. By Joshua Dubler and Vincent Lloyd.
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At the women’s prison where I have spent time as a teacher and researcher, the long-serving chaplain runs a choir program. In the era before COVID-19—and, one hopes, again, once singing and gathering is safe for all—the choir traveled to local communities for vocal performance and worship. Within a varied repertoire, one frequent and memorable offering is a rendition of Tasha Cobbs Leonard’s 2012 gospel hit “Break Every Chain.” The anthem begins and builds on a single refrain:

There is power in the name of Jesus
To break every chain, break every chain, break every chain.¹

The incarcerated women I have heard sing these words remained close in my mind as I read Joshua Dubler and Vincent Lloyd’s *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons*. Of course, given the intense grip that prison culture has come to hold on incarcerated people’s lives, which Dubler and Lloyd describe, the women are at least ostensibly singing about spiritual freedom rather than literal carceral destruction. Further, Dubler notes (236), the book’s title references Isaiah 58 and its use by famed antislavery abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. It is not a reference to Cobbs Leonard directly.

However, there are affinities between the words quoted above and Dubler and Lloyd’s central argument: there is power—not necessarily in the name of Jesus, but certainly in religion’s visionary and liturgical resources—to help fuel abolitionist movements and dismantle American carceral systems. Rather than simply working with congregations as partners, the authors write, movements to end incarceration must “get religion” at an imaginative and moral (if broadly defined) level (8). Meanwhile, to make any meaningful headway against the US carceral behemoth, religious communities must catch what the authors call the “abolition spirit” (106). “Even if all you wish to do is ‘end mass incarceration,’” they write, “prison abolition is still a necessity” as a radical horizon that makes meaningful incremental change more possible (10). In making these arguments and in the careful historical work that constitutes much of the book’s core chapters, *Break Every Yoke* is a pathbreaking intervention for scholars, activists, and religious communities alike. The volume consciously builds on important existing work on religion and prisons² and abolition,³ while at the

1 Tasha Cobbs, vocalist, “Break Every Chain,” by Will Reagan, recorded June 2012, track 7 on *Grace*, Motown Gospel (EGS), compact disc.

2 Examples include Joshua Dubler, *Down in the Chapel: Religious Life in an American Prison* (London: Picador, 2014); Tanya Erzen, *God in Captivity: The Rise of Faith-Based Prison Ministries in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017); Jennifer Graber, *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); and Amy Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

3 Book-length examples here include classics such as Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in*

same time charting a new way forward for work that both unapologetically makes use of religious resources and is clear in its abolitionist stance.

To accomplish this, Dubler and Lloyd employ two primary rhetorical strategies: explicit argumentation for faith-informed abolitionism (including pragmatic examples), and detailed historical narration of religion's role in the changing US relationship to incarceration. The former strategy is most prominent in chapters 1 and 5, the latter in chapters 2 through 4. The result is that well-researched historical description forms the book's core—it “shows” more than it “tells.” While at times I wondered if a more fleshed-out political theological argument for abolition might have better served Dubler and Lloyd's ends, overall, giving greater prominence to compelling historical documentation allows readers space to come to the conclusion on their own. This is a powerful and much-needed strategy in the abolitionist space.

Where Dubler and Lloyd do offer more direct arguments for abolition—and that abolition is at its best a religious project—is in chapter 1. They begin by reminding the reader that as recently as the early 1970s in the United States, prison abolition was a not-uncommon position and assumed near-future reality. Addressing why decarceration did not happen is the work of chapters 2 through 4. Elaborating their argument, Dubler and Lloyd expand on their contention that contemporary prison reformers do not adequately diagnose the carceral problem and that abolition is the necessarily radical stance that will make any meaningful reforms possible. The abolitionist stance, they write, “insists on principles, on absolutes, on truths—and sets about willing these truths onto a recalcitrant world” (47). Indeed, it is perhaps this deeply deontological orientation that helps explain why pragmatists working within the criminal legal system at times chafe at abolitionist rhetoric. In complement to the argument for abolition, this chapter also spells out why the authors feel that religion is a natural partner in work toward decarceration. Simply put, abolition requires faith in the possible—as Dubler and Lloyd put it, “abolitionist faith is the faith that together, in time, we will radically reshape the world in the image of true, divine justice” (49). This quotation also points to a final core argument discussed in chapter 1 and elaborated throughout the rest of the book: that prisons have been made conceptually necessary in part through a shift in the cultural understanding of “justice.”

Indeed, tracing this shift is the primary work of chapter 2, the first of the volume's central historical chapters. Principally, Dubler and Lloyd illustrate how “justice” evolved during the 1960s and 1970s from a cross-party concept that indicated God's “higher law” to the simple following of earthly laws and punishment of those who break them. In parallel, they show, American political rhetoric moved from being grounded in the broad terms of mainline Protestantism to bifurcation between a largely secularized left and an individualized, Evangelical right. Structured by US presidential era, this chapter re-narrates a familiar history using the often-ignored lens of religion to illuminate the existential depth of the political shifts that underwrote mass incarceration's rise.

Chapters 3 and 4 each trace a similar twentieth-century arc, foregrounding different topics. Chapter 3 homes in on religious communities' responses to incarceration, and as is a repeated theme in the book, the authors argue that things have been getting worse in recent decades—but that there are a few new signs of hope. For Dubler and Lloyd, religious work on incarceration can either show signs of the “abolition spirit,” using theological resources to undermine and resist incarceration, or can serve to excuse and shore up the prison system. The authors argue that the former was much more prominent in the mid-twentieth century, for example in the early restorative

Globalizing California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Dubler and Lloyd also cite a wide variety of shorter anti-carceral writings and initiatives; the book is useful in part as an archive of these resources.

justice work of Howard Zehr. As left-leaning activists became more secular, liberal Christian denominations lost power, and conservative Evangelicalism took hold politically, however, abolitionist work left religion behind and prison ministry became politically quiet. The authors reserve particular ire for Charles Colson, who they argue (133) co-opted restorative justice into programs that largely affirm the prison system as is. Nevertheless, Dubler and Lloyd find hope in new religiously grounded experiments such as the Yurok Tribal Court. The division between interventions deemed “good” and “bad” in this chapter is strong, and perhaps overstated. Nevertheless, the authors again effectively narrate a twentieth-century shift in the religious and political landscape of US carceral practices.

Chapter 4’s lens on this historical arc is the religion happening *inside* prisons, and all of the shifts the authors have been tracing are made clear again. Religious movements that Dubler and Lloyd identify as abolitionist—like Philadelphia’s MOVE and New York’s Muslim Brotherhood—were much more prominent before the 1980s. Of particular interest to *JLR* readers, the central lever for change in this chapter is a court case: *US v. Seeger*, 380 U.S. 163 (1965). Itself a case about conscientious objection from the Vietnam War, *Seeger*, the authors explain (166–73), established rigid tests of both belief sincerity and religious authenticity that effectively curbed many incipient religious movements in US prisons. Combined with the cultural and political forces described in earlier chapters, this case helped quash abolitionist religion in carceral settings across the country. In its wake, and fueled by political and theological trends of the time, came prison religion that is generally more apolitical, individual-oriented, and does not explicitly challenge the carceral system. Recent protests by incarcerated persons like hunger strikes, the authors point out, have been carried out in a distinctly secular key.

With these three historical chapters completed, the reader is left asking, “what next?” Chapter 5 answers that question by offering practical examples of religiously based abolitionist organizing—though both “religiously based” and “abolitionist” are intentionally broadly defined. In highlighting these examples, notably the Muslim #believersbailout campaign to pay bail during Ramadan and the millennial-run Christians for the Abolition of Prisons, Dubler and Lloyd offer readers concrete illustrations of what abolitionist practice can look like in the short term—and how religion can help. The authors argue that even secular protests of the current moment often take on ritual qualities, and that creative collaboration with religious ritual practices may help strengthen these efforts even further (213). Similarly (and provocatively, to some), the chapter encourages collaboration with those whose work may not be explicitly abolitionist, but who, the authors say, are trying “to think and do justice differently” (225). Examples include Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative and Let’s Circle Up, a restorative justice program. In this, Dubler and Lloyd endorse a dual strategy of both “casting [a] wider net” to find partners for pragmatic work (225), *and* urging communities to embrace what they call “abolitionist potency” (218).

As someone who engages a diverse array of partners in my work to support incarcerated persons and push back on the system’s many indignities, I deeply appreciated this coalitional stance. My only disappointment was that it was not made clear sooner and more strenuously throughout the book. Explicitly abolitionist organizing has indisputable power and importance for advancing meaningful system change, as the authors argue. Yet depending on where one works or lives in relation to the system, this explicit and uncompromising position may not be possible or strategic. Transformative work can happen at many levels—the restorative justice classroom, the local district attorney’s race, the state legislature, the streets where abolitionists prophetically call for an end to jail construction—with or without the “abolitionist” label. It is important that abolitionists and so-called “reformers” alike recognize the value of every intervention that meaningfully pushes against the system, and of working in complement—something that many on all sides frequently

forget. Dubler and Lloyd clearly recognize this, as their coalitional posture and discussion of Mariame Kaba's language of "non-reformist reforms" make clear (52). Yet given how fractious the anti-mass-incarceration space has become, I wish this call to coalition—even while building an insistent case for abolition—had been a more emphatic and consistent theme.

Of course, some abolitionists will likely read the call to a "wider net" and feel exactly the opposite: that compromise is a slippery slope, and Dubler and Lloyd invite readers too far down it. Perhaps ironically, this objection and my own frustration together point to one of the book's great strengths: it is likely to make many audiences a little bit uncomfortable. Given the volume's strong historical work and invitational style of argumentation, however, this is likely to be a productive unsettling. Indeed, the authors frame the book as targeted toward different audiences who likely all bring different forms of wariness: scholars outside of religion working on incarceration, scholars and practitioners within religion and theology, and secular abolitionist organizers (15–16). All of these audiences are likely to walk away enriched by *Break Every Yoke*, if they can listen past any knee-jerk reactions, as are students in graduate or upper-level undergraduate religion and social science courses. Such listening is itself an important practice in work for social change, religiously informed or not. That this volume asks us to enact this practice is a gift I hope readers accept.

The work, after all, is not ultimately about these methodological fights. It is about the human beings entangled within the degrading and labyrinthine structure we call the US criminal legal system, like the women singing "break every chain" who I heard in my mind each time I picked up this volume. *Break Every Yoke* is groundbreaking in its call to unite religious and abolitionist resources against this system and for human dignity and repair. If readers approach it with an open mind and sincerely ask what components they can take into their work, the agenda the book envisions can begin to grow.

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