

BOOK REVIEW

***In This Place Called Prison: Women's Religious Life in the Shadow of Punishment.* By Rachel Ellis. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023. Paperback, ISBN: 9780520384545**

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Massive incarceration in the United States has now provided a depressingly steady number of accounts of its dehumanizing effects – by historians, sociologists and incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons – with little evidence of real reform. Rachel Ellis, in her new book about the religious life of incarcerated women at one east coast correctional facility, gives us a well-written and carefully considered description of what she calls the secondhand carceralism that characterizes religious life in the prison she studied. Religion is pervasive but also pervasively in service to the narratives, logics and values that drive retributive punishment. Based in her own year-long ethnographic research inside the prison, Ellis combines the voices of the women she meets and comes to know with a deep knowledge of the existing literature to show once more the ways in which “free” religion, American religion, both shapes and is shaped by the prison context: the small incentives and privileges that lead incarcerated women to participate in Bible studies, worship services and other religious activities; the tight fit between protestant and neoliberal ideologies of personal responsibility; the discrimination against minority religious groups that is revealed in many ways, as for example the fact that evangelical literature (often provided for free by authors and publishers) fills the limited library selection; and the providential thinking that shockingly reinforces and masks the cruel arbitrariness of penal practices. There is arguably no outside of the dominating narrative of incarceration in American prisons, no place from which to understand religion as separate from its world.

Ellis is a skilled and empathetic ethnographer who writes well. The incarcerated women about whom she writes are complex people navigating a world of very limited choices. Many are eloquent in their articulation of the role that religion plays for them while inside, including opportunities for supporting one another. Most of her interlocutors have been given very long sentences, serving time while their children grow to adulthood and their families tire of visiting them. Religion eases the time in a place where very little else is on offer for reasons both of limited funding and of the punitive politics that drive incarceration. Yet, as Ellis says, religious narratives of

personal transformation “bolster punitive state goals when they maintain the notion of prison as a positive turning point or a ‘lifechanging’ institution.” (97)

Ellis’ focus is on the incarcerated women (she decides early on that she cannot study the prison officers as well) but she also reveals the limits of those who minister to them, mostly volunteers with narrow theological understandings and a tendency to underline the logics of punitive control and the conservative prejudices of the communities from which they come. And yet there is virtually no one else. It is mostly evangelical Christians who step up to do this work.

Ellis concludes her book with a “Methodological Appendix” that describes the disciplinary protocols (both academic and correctional) that governed the conditions of her work and confesses her feelings of guilt about the exploitative nature of such ethnographic research and her acute awareness of always having been an outsider, maybe never really able to understand the women with whom she interacts. She explains:

I do not know what punishment feels like when there is no end in sight, what interactions with prison staff look like when no one is watching, and how authority crosses into coercion. I have not endured family separation, nor a dark cloud of guilt and regret, made even darker by the never-ending remorse and perform rhetorical self-flagellation in the name of accountability ... there is no way to fully understand the experience of being punished without living it, and I would always be an outsider because I was free to exit any time. (209–10)

If comprehensive reform is the only solution, as many have concluded, including Ellis, what is the purpose of adding to this literature? There are certainly fewer studies of women’s prisons than of men’s prisons. This book fills a gap in the literature for that reason. With respect to religion, there are hints that she has more to say. Ellis is a skilled observer and writer in the sociological mode. Citing classic sociologists of religion, DuBois and Durkheim, she shows us that religion is always both liberation and constraint, individual and social, text and ritual. But she does not address the pressing question for many students of prison religion, that is, whether religion makes a difference, whether religion is different than, say, beekeeping, the one secular program she mentions. She says only that “religion matters because it matters to the women sentenced ...” (213). It also matters to Ellis. In her appendix, Ellis reveals that she has participated in the religious life of the prison by praying for the women that she meets, during her time there and since, as they asked her to do. It would be interesting to hear how she understands her own religious life to intersect with theirs. It would be interesting to hear whether Ellis believes that thinking and acting theologically – speaking back theologically to carceral realities – has any capacity to bridge the gulf between her and them – and what that would look like for her – and for the future of criminal justice reform.

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