

Book Review

Law, Culture and the Humanities

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In This Place Called Prison: Women's Religious Life in the Shadow of Punishment

By Rachel Ellis. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023. 270pp. \$29.95 (paper). ISBN: 9780520384545

Rachel Ellis constructs a vivid and compelling ethnographic account of the constitutive power of religion in Mapleside Prison. Moving deftly between accessibly rendered engagements with high sociological theory and evocative interviews with incarcerated women, Ellis argues that religion itself has become an extension of and instrumental to carceral control (14)—a position that is sustained by not only the retreat of federal and state funding for prisons and the retrenchment of retributive “law and order” rhetoric, but also the embeddedness of Protestant culture in American society. Religion, Ellis concludes, cannot be a mechanism for the lived realization of freedom if its exercise is bound up with institutional practices that are fundamentally ordered towards domination, subject formation, and docility.

By way of making this argument, Ellis’s book unfolds over the course of five substantive chapters and a rich introduction, conclusion, and epilogue. She traces, in turn, the laws that govern the operations of the prison and the expression of religion within it; the highly structured and bureaucratic nature of the day-to-day lives of women inside the prison walls; the lure of Protestantism and its redemptive messages for those who have been convicted of criminal wrongdoing; the ways in which such messages construct normative ideologies of gender and the family; and, finally, the construction of prison hierarchies on the basis of one’s professed religious practice. She concludes by encouraging her readers to consider the implications of her research: that as “austerity measures have made prisons more punishing” (166), justice-oriented scholars must interrogate the ways in which ostensibly freedom-enhancing measures—like statutory and constitutional guarantees of religious expression—become sites of enhanced retribution. To do this, she urges scholars and activists to consider forms of prison reform—or prison abolition—that attend to the manner in which carceral power can replicate and reproduce itself across and within social institutions, even with the best of intentions.

Ellis, in support of this conclusion and invocation, offers a forceful contribution to the field: the idea of secondhand carcerality. Secondhand carcerality, Ellis argues, is the “reiteration of carceral control that occurs via contact with the criminal legal system” (5). Within the context of Mapleside Prison, secondhand carcerality emerges in the reconstruction of religious life within its walls; it is religion that offers incarcerated women the

opportunity to be free from their cellblocks and from the often rigid and arbitrary control of prison wards in order to seek a redemption that contrasts “with the dominant state discourse denying moral worthiness to those behind bars” (82–83). But it is also religion that reinforces disparities in class status, race- or gender-based differential treatment, and narratives of godly retribution that legitimize criminal sanctions that fail to account for structurally-embedded inequality (82–83). Religion’s “double function,” Ellis writes, demonstrates how “discourses become logics, moving from sense-making to guiding principles, as religion can urge carceral compliance in the name of godly self-control and personal improvement” (84).

The redemptive-retributive character of secondhand carcerality can be seen to good effect in Ellis’s middle chapters, especially Chapter Three. In Chapter Three Ellis traces the narratives of incarcerated women from the chapel to a parole hearing, noting that many of the women who populate Mapleside Prison arrive with histories that are marked by sex- and gender-based violence, often at the hands of intimate partners. Ellis recounts the story of Anne, who killed her abuser and, subsequently, received a life sentence. Yet as Anne travels through the prison system, she has no access to therapeutic or social services; her only way to “make sense” of her life and her sentence is through sustained encounters with the ministry of Protestant volunteers. For Anne and for others, these encounters lead them to conclude that their lives have been marked by hardship *because* of their distance from God, and that to serve a sentence in prison is to be saved “from a dangerous path.” Religion, in other words, clarifies “one of the hardest, most vulnerable times in their lives by declaring it has a greater purpose than pure punishment, just as it converts past traumas into tests of faith” (90–92).

Ellis then contrasts the stories of sense-making redemption with the arcane operations of the parole board. In sermons and prayer groups, religious volunteers emphasize the relationship between the women’s greater acceptance of a Christian god and their readiness to be released from incarceration: “no parole board,” they preach, “can get in the way of God’s will [because] God is the ultimate judge” (99). Yet in interviews with prison wardens and parole officials, Ellis determines that the religious lives of the women play no role in their parole decision-making processes: they instead look to the completion of drug treatment and work training programs, weighed against bureaucratic “risk assessment” tools predicated on highly specific, and deeply subjective, criteria. These criteria create arbitrariness within the parole system; women are often mistakenly notified that they have become eligible for early parole, and even when they are eligible, more often than not, they are denied. Rather than understanding such arbitrariness as failure of the state or evidence of an inequitable system, Ellis notes how the women rationalize their parole as part of God’s plan—a rationalization that promotes further compliance with the whims of the prison system, even as it at once intensifies the feeling of punishment and absolves the carceral system of responsibility. This pattern continues across Mapleside Prison’s operations, even compelling women to acquiesce to two hundred days of solitary confinement as punishment for buying sneakers from a non-approved vendor (107).

This book is a welcome addition to the interdisciplinary study of the law, and it would make a powerful contribution to conversations in sociology, philosophy, ethics, political science, religion, and gender studies classrooms—as well as to scholarly research

agendas. Ellis does a remarkable job of introducing her readers to the complexities of and debates in the study of prisons, even as she propels those who are conversant with the literature to greater understanding of carceral power. While the reader may sometimes want for more engagement with non-Christian religions within the prison—especially those like the Nation of Islam, which she notes, often does significant work in men’s prisons in highlighting the ongoing injustices of policing, prisons, and surveillance—Ellis reflects on *why* such engagement must be limited as, she explains, a faith’s departure from Christianity intensifies the logic of incarceration even more. Indeed, Ellis’s final reflections on her positionality as a Jewish woman, and an outsider to the prison, are a welcome addition to the text; in the conclusion and a methodological appendix, Ellis reflexively parses how—at different times and in different contexts—she was both “participant and observer,” a status that rendered her subject to secondhand carcerality and a possible conduit for it (206). *In This Place Called Prison* is a force.

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