Guest Editor's Introduction

Special Issue on Prison and Religion in the Global South

This special issue on *Prison and Religion in the Global South* advances work in an area that has been largely outside the academic community's attention. Prisons and prisoners were, for a very long time, interesting merely as a problematic group of people to be adjusted and disciplined. Research thus focused on the questions of how to manage prisoners and how to effect behavioral change. A shift in scholarly focus emerged only in the last 70 years, starting with three classic studies: Graham Sykes, *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*, in the 1950s; Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Condition of the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, in the early 1960s; and the widely read historical study by Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, in the 1970s, which used the prison as a lens to understand modern Western society. Since then, there has been a steady increase of scholarly literature from various academic disciplines and on all aspects of penal life, including the topic of religion in prison. Sociologists and criminologists have asked about the impact of religious faith on prison adjustment and on lower recidivism rates; psychologists have asked about how faith contributes to coping with the deprivation suffered in prison and about factors that motivate inmates to join religious activities; anthropologists have observed the role of religion within the communal life of inmates; legal scholars have discussed how the coercive context of penal institutions impacts inmates' religious rights; political scientists have considered how inmates' religious faith affects the distribution of power; and religious scholars have delved into the rich expressions of religious life behind bars. All this academic output, however, has remained firmly focused on the situation in the Global North. The question about what happens in prisons in the rest of the world is, if not absent, restricted to publications that failed to attract worldwide attention.

The reasons for this neglect are manifold, but the most obvious is the general inaccessibility of prisons. Most prisons are in remote geographical locations that make access difficult and costly. Permission to enter a prison is not easily granted and anyone interested in visiting – even a researcher – must first undergo a tedious administrative process. The hiddenness of penal life is part of the politics of punishment and what may be called the “invisibility cloak” surrounding those convicted of a crime. It is part of a social construction that establishes a harmful dualism between “us” and “them”, between law-abiding

citizens and the hidden world inside prison walls. This construction enables people outside to feel good about themselves: bad inside and good outside. The reality is of course different. People in prison are, in general, neither better nor worse than people outside. The only difference is that inmates have been convicted of a crime.

Another reason for the sparseness of such studies is that most people concerned about people in prison, particularly in relation to matters of faith, are religious activists and not scholars. They are interested in inmates' conversion, not in analyzing or describing religious life in prison. Anyone related to religious activities in prison will easily recognize that most volunteer visitors come from revivalist Christian backgrounds. Still another reason is that a neglect of prisoners in research simply mirrors their neglect by society. Limited funds for penal programs are paralleled by limited funds for research on matters related to prisoners. Amid widespread poverty and manifold social problems in many countries of the Global South, the situation of people in prison appears less urgent than what are seen as more pressing problems. Moreover, Christian groups who are most engaged in religious activities in prison, are, in the Asian context, a social minority. As such, they stand at the social margins and either actively opt for a low-key presence or are not seen as relevant enough to warrant public research funding.

Only recently have prisons in Asia, Africa, and Latin America begun to attract more scholarly interest. An important contribution was the historical study by Dikötter and Brown, *Cultures of Confinement: A History of the Prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (2007). Besides this historical study, much of the discussion is focused on topics such as health or human rights, rarely touching the role of religion. This is even more regrettable when we consider that people engaged in social and development work in contexts of poverty are increasingly cognizant of the crucial role of religious actors in bringing change to disadvantaged communities.

There are a few noteworthy exemptions to this overall sparsity of research. Johnson (*If I Give My Soul: Pentecostalism Inside of Prison in Rio de Janeiro*, University of Minnesota 2012), who has a contribution to this special issue, shows how Pentecostal faith is a possible alternative for inmates in Brazilian prisons. They are mostly from poor favelas and despised by dominant groups in society as "killable people." Robert Brenneman (*Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America*, Oxford University Press 2012) writes about gang members converting to Christianity in Central America. Based on many years of participation in Christian ministry, I myself have written about experiences of Christian inmates in the Hong Kong penal context (*Beyond the Walls of Separation: Christian Faith and Ministry in Prison*, Cascade 2014).

This special issue hopes to contribute to an emerging scholarly concern, keep up the momentum, and encourage more research. We do believe that prison in general, and religion in the penal context in particular, is important for a better understanding of both religion *and* society. Prison continues to be a lens through which we discover the deeper meanings and values of a society. Studying religion in prison is deeply meaningful and fascinating because the two areas – religion and prison – stand in a relation of fundamental yet fruitful tension and have contrasting concerns. Penal management forces inmates into a status of total heteronomy: it stands for control and constant supervision; and much of prison has a fundamentally depersonalizing effect, as when inmates have to submit to standard haircuts and uniform clothing, or find their names replaced by numbers. By contrast, religion stands for an experience of freedom and autonomy: it offers dignity to the individual and it has an implicit equalizing effect, removing the distinction between people inside and outside. Religion in prison thus subverts core aspects of institutional power.

Yet, despite this fundamental opposition, penal managers commonly encourage inmates to participate in religious activities. Do they allow, even encourage, such activities because it looks good to have religion in prison? Do they hope that the prison system's rehabilitation of inmates will benefit from faith-based groups' free help? Do they understand that "more God [is] less crime" (as Bryan R. Johnson titled his book summarizing how faith-based initiatives bring lasting change to people)? Or do they promote religion as a pacifier, contributing to social order in prison? Is religion simply a form of finding release in an unbearable situation? Is it accepted as a compensatory experience that helps inmates better submit to the hardship of prison life, a kind of safety valve to more easily accept the daily routine of domination – similar to bread and circuses, a few annual days of carnival doled out by the emperor as a countercultural experience that makes subjects better accept the normality of humiliation?

Whether religious activities and experiences in prison reflect the structures of power to which inmates are subject – the power of the institution and of social groups such as prison gangs – or whether they subvert and undermine them by offering a countercultural experience is a question that cannot be answered abstractly. But it is a crucial question hovering in the background of all accounts about religious life in prison. Religion is always *both* hegemonically reinforcing the status quo *and* offering a liberating vision of a different world that is preemptively realized in the faith community. Whether hegemonic or liberative, unless inmates plan to break out from prison, the coercive regime and the constant limitations on one's movement are a reality that simply needs to be accepted. It is ultimately about the power of the institution to control and

the hope and actions of inmates to maintain dignity, purpose, and an element of freedom even under the constraints of penal life.

The question of institutions' exercise of power and inmates' attempts at maintaining autonomy is relevant for prisons around the world. Yet, studying religion in prisons in the specific context of the Global South has special meaning not just because most research has been restricted to the Global North. First, religion in the Global South tends to be less questioned, less institutionalized, more revivalist and more directly shaping daily life than the more secularized and more institutionalized forms of religion in the Global North. Second, while most penal administrations in the Global North have at least some government-sponsored programs for inmates' care and rehabilitation, in the Global South such care is often left to agents of civil society, often faith-based groups. Most governments are simply unwilling to spend resources on those in prison. It is fascinating to study how beliefs and religious actors from both within and outside the prison step into this vacuum and contribute to individual and communal care. Third, many of the institutional forms of prisons in the Global South are colonial relics or imports of penal reforms from the North, but they have undergone a long process of contextualization. It is thus interesting to see how northern patterns of penal administration are replicated in very different cultural contexts. This also affects the role of religion.

Approaching the topic of prison and religion in the Global South, one will discover an amazing richness to religious life in prison. A few impressions from across a region with which I am familiar, Southeast Asia, offer an initial survey. In the Philippine capital Manila, near its old town center, in the Manila City Jail, nearly 6000 inmates live in unbearably crowded circumstances in a small space of just 0.02 km². Yet, despite this extreme lack of space, prominent place is given to three churches and one mosque. Across the city, in the southern outskirts, lies the New Bilibid Prison where a visitor discovers a similar misery: over 19,000 inmates are squeezed together in its maximum-security section to build possibly the world's most populous and, with an area of only 0.1 km², probably the world's most crowded prison. Despite the limited space, a visitor will find 26 different churches and an even larger number of religious groups engaged in religious ministry. Inmate-pastors, ordained during their long incarceration, elders, evangelists, teachers, and even a bishop consecrated in prison tend to the spiritual needs of their fellow inmates.

In the neighboring archipelago, Indonesia, the Penjara Tangerang medium-security prison in Western Jakarta houses more than 400 female inmates. Here, daily worship, sometimes twice a day, is central part of prison life for almost twenty percent of inmates. The frequency of worship does not dull the religious fervor, which finds expression in testimonies and self-composed songs.

Similar to the Philippine case, religious life is largely led and organized by the inmates themselves.

Moving north to Cambodia, on the outskirts of the capital Phnom Penh lies the Prey Sa Correctional Center 2, with around 1,200 female and juvenile inmates. Women from a dozen different nations gather in the small chapel and celebrate in Khmer and English. They share how their faith has helped them overcome anger towards broken relationships and how they have found new purpose. At the end of the service, visiting volunteers distribute food packages sponsored by a friend of Prison Fellowship Cambodia.

Turning to Thailand's Pathumtani Men's Correctional Institute for Drug Addicts, outside Bangkok, Christian religious life is more subdued, as only around two percent of the inmate population join the religious teaching sessions of a visiting Christian group. The prison management arranges regular Buddhist teaching sessions for the inmates. As a marginal community and with limited access to prison, Christian prison ministry focuses instead on released inmates, supporting them in their reintegration into society through a hostel in downtown Bangkok.

Christian care for those in prison in Laos is even more low-key and secretive. A small group of volunteers, overseas missionaries and a few expats from other Asian countries regularly visit inmates, bringing medicine, food, and other daily necessities, encouraging them, and giving legal advice.

By contrast, the situation in Myanmar offers some surprise. As the country is known for its long history of military dictatorship and a hegemonic role of state-sponsored Buddhism, a visitor will be astonished to discover a church structure inside the infamous Insein prison on the northern outskirts of Yangon. The story of this building is that a well-connected Christian leader, during talks with the government, had an opportunity to bring up his spiritual concern for those in prison. The government, in turn, was interested in creating positive news about human rights in Myanmar and allowed him to build a church. Still, despite this small breakthrough, Christians from outside have only limited access to those inside. Christian communal life thus largely relies on inmate pastors. Released inmates who became Christian inside prison offer support by waiting at roadsides near Insein where they know that their former fellow inmates will pass in chains, on their daily way to the quarries.

Moving to the culturally Chinese world, to Hong Kong and Singapore, religious activities depend largely on initiatives from outside. Imprisonment in these penal contexts means life not only behind high walls but also under an extremely high level of supervision inside those walls. Such penal regimes do not allow inmates sufficient internal freedom to move around and connect with like-minded inmates, i.e., to establish religious communities. Yet, both jurisdic-

tions allow faith-based groups relatively generous access to interact with the inmates and conduct programs. Changi Prison in Singapore even allows faith-based units where religious groups offer intensive spiritual training.

These are just a few impressions of the rich manifestations of religious life in prison in one geographic area. Much of it, admittedly, is Christian, as the most active religious groups in prison around the world are of Christian faith. But inmates and volunteer visitors of other faiths are equally active. Buddhist inmates sit chanting and meditating in their cells or join with visitors to listen to the teaching of visiting monks. Muslim inmates continue their religious practice of daily prayers and yearly Ramadan. Imams and Jewish rabbis regularly visit those in prison to care for their spiritual well-being. And inmates across the region carry out popular religious practices to gain divine favor.

The six articles gathered in this special issue offer probing insights into six specific contexts of the Global South: two articles are on Latin America (Brazil and Paraguay), two on Asia (Hong Kong and Philippines), one on Africa (Nigeria) and one on Europe (Italy). The inclusion of the last one, discussing inmates from the Global South in prison in Italy, is meaningful as it demonstrates that the categories of Global South and North cannot be simplistically divided along continental lines, even less so in matters relating to penal affairs.

In the first article, *Andrew Johnson* offers an ethnographic study on the thriving presence of Pentecostal Christianity in Brazilian prisons. His study describes how Pentecostal Christians organize themselves in Brazilian prisons as an alternative to the dominant presence of prison gangs yet share many of their characteristics. Besides offering a well-researched insight into the particularities of Brazilian prison life, his findings also contribute to the study of global Pentecostalism. Referring to a similar cultural context with a similar penal management, *Tim Revett* vividly describes the inhospitable situation of Paraguay's Tacumbú Penitentiary and discusses motivations of chaplains and other Christian visitors to share the Christian faith in such surroundings. The article shows the importance of religious chapels and cell blocks where the penal community follows different rules than the dominant ones established by prison gangs.

The article by *Lionel Njeukam* on Christian activities in Nigerian prisons and among released inmates illustrates the important role of faith-based organizations in providing crucial assistance for survival, both during imprisonment and after release. His case study is but one example of how Christians throughout the centuries have played a crucial role in providing basic assistance to people in prison. The article by *Doriano Saracino* considers the Italian prison demographic of immigrants from the Global South, who make up around one-quarter of that country's penal population. Most of them follow other faiths

than the majority Catholicism. His study on religious diversity is an important addition to this volume because it looks beyond the more commonly studied Christian faith community and because it is critical of the common view of prisons as hubs for the radicalization of Muslims. The article by *Jose Eos Trinidad* is based on interviews with inmates in the maximum-security section of the New Bilibid Prison in the Philippines. His study shows how religious groups contribute to a sense of normal life in prison. Finally, my article studies motivations and experiences of prison visitors in the Hong Kong context. The focus is not so much on how volunteers impact inmates, a question that has been studied more commonly, but on how the ministry in prison affects volunteers. This direction of investigation is supported by the idea that religious communication and mission is never simply one-directional.

The few articles included in this volume offer a small glimpse of religious activities in prisons around the world. The journal would have loved to receive more articles, particularly also on contributions of other faiths. We hope that this volume will inspire further investigation. The articles reflect several aspects that are common to most prisons in the Global South. First, much of prisoners' care, reformation, or rehabilitation is initiated and sponsored by religious groups. The state can punish but seems unable or unwilling to provide resources for rehabilitation. By contrast, religious groups provide support of all kinds, from the material to the relational, educational, psychological, and spiritual, both during and after imprisonment. Second, the articles show the crucial role of revivalist – and, more importantly, Pentecostal – Christianity particularly evident in Nigeria and Brazil, less, however, in Hong Kong. Yet, traditional mainline forms of Christianity continue to play a strong though different role. Catholic Christians have been particularly relevant in assuming a prophetic role, that is, in pointing out failures of prisons and issues of justice. A third important aspect is the crucial role that religious volunteers play. This is important to note, as much religious activity in the Global North is based on more institutional chaplaincies that usually come from mainline denominations. Finally, the articles show how the most important religious activists are not visitors but inmates themselves, who are actively engaged in teaching, preaching, evangelizing, and caring. This is particularly evident in the article on Brazil, but the same could be observed anywhere. Amid often miserable prison conditions, inmates maintain agency and subject status – against a view that sees them too often just as victims, and, religiously, as passive recipients of care.

The articles emphasize the perspective of inmates and try to describe the penal reality as experienced by inmates. They allow us to move beyond a naïve view that prisons, or in some cases prison gangs, exercise complete and unalterable control over inmates. While religion in prison is not the only forum

in which inmates show agency and creativity, it is the only space where this happens in a communal, institutionalized, and legal form. Religion in prison is possibly the only area where inmates establish something like a civil society. These articles show how prisons are places where both social relationships and religious life are intensified. Prisons are, in the words of Beckford and Gilliat in their study *Religion in Prison: Equal Rites in a Multi-Faith Society*, “extreme social settings” that both intensify “competition, rivalry, hostility, manipulateness, and vindictiveness – as well as friendship, altruism, solidarity and generosity” (1998: 142). They are, indeed, spiritually vibrant places of hope against all odds where a fragile yet, at times, solidary community shows tremendous resiliency in facing the hardships of imprisonment.

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