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A Theology for the Penal Abolition Movement

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The prison–industrial complex is a multifaceted construction of control and domination, most commonly seen as the U.S. prison and jail system, the concrete and steel buildings that warehouse individuals. While prisons and jails are a pivotal aspect, the prison–industrial complex includes an entire culture of state and corporate collusion to control, discipline, and torture poor/low-income communities and communities of color. The tactics range from police forces to cameras mounted in communities; from the (in)justice system to corporate profiteering from prison phone-calls; from immigration enforcement to media depictions of "criminals"; and on and on.

The prison–industrial complex builds its strength from the myth that it is solving the problems of "crime" and violence. In Joy James' work, Marilyn Buck, a white anti-racist revolutionary, wrote of prison as "a relationship with an abuser who controls your every move, keeps you locked in the house. There's the ever-present threat of violence or further repression, if you don't toe the line." While Buck is specifically referring to her experience within a particular prison, the metaphor of an abusive relationship is significant when one considers the prison–industrial complex as the abuser and marginalized communities as the survivor. The Network/La Red, a lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, and queer domestic violence organization based in Boston, Massachusetts, defines partner abuse as, "a systematic pattern of control where one person tries to control the thoughts, beliefs, and/or actions of their partner, someone they are dating or someone they had an intimate relationship with." The prison–industrial complex is this ever-present force in the daily lives of those most marginalized in our society, continuously constricting the borders of what is considered right, legal, and appropriate while constantly limiting access to loved ones and support structures.

Writing in Joy James' anthology, Tiyo Attallah Salah-El, a lifer in Pennsylvania, asserts that prison abolition, "like the abolition of slavery, is a long-range goal. Abolition is not simply a moment in time, but a protracted process. Prison abolitionism should not now be considered a pipe dream, but rather

a strong strategy that can in time bring about a halt to the building of more prisons." The modern abolition movement must listen to the voices of those in INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and others who remind the movement that, "to live violence-free lives, we must develop holistic strategies for addressing violence that speak to the intersection of all forms of oppression." Abolition is not simply an eschatological moment, but rather it is a reflection of our collective ontological selves; it is a movement built on hope. A movement built on hope that, according to Letty Russell, is "only realistic when it is combined with praxis, but it forms an indispensable dynamic for continuing change in the face of the resistance of those whose interests are served by the status quo."

The modern abolitionist movement has not created for itself the necessary resources, at this point, to create a theology to help shape the movement. What is the role of the divine in the struggle? Where does religion find itself in the question of the prison-industrial complex? How do people of faith function in relationship to prisoners, police, judges, survivors of violence, and all of the many facets of the prison–industrial complex? Where has religion been throughout the history of the prison–industrial complex's growth, and what resources from the past may be helpful today?

In a reflection on the theology of Universalist theologian Clarence Russell Skinner, James Hunt quotes Josiah Royce: "The future task of religion is the task of inventing and applying arts which shall win men [sic] over to unity. . . . Judge every social device every proposed reform, every national and every local enterprise, by the one test: does this help towards the coming of the universal community?" When one looks at the pervasive violence, oppression, and ineffectiveness of the prison–industrial complex, it should not be very difficult to find an answer to whether or not the prison–industrial complex is bringing the universal community closer or pushing it farther away. Skinner wrote in his own words, "All great social problems involve theological conceptions. We may divorce church from state, but we cannot separate the idea of God from the political life of the people." So then, what does God, or the divine as known by other names, have to say about the prison–industrial complex?

I understand theology to exist, at its fullest potential, for the service of liberation. According to Gustavo Gutierrez:

> Theology must be critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles. . . . Theological reflection would then necessarily be a criticism of society and the Church insofar as they are called and addressed by the Word of God; it would be a critical theory, worked out in the light of the Word accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose.

To translate for those who cannot/choose not to identify with God language, "Word of God" can be understood as the beauty of reason's voice expressed

through the words of a community, or the magical whispers of fairies that call out for the great authenticity of justice, or simply the great mystery of infinite love. Theology must play a role in any movement to abolish the prison–industrial complex as it can feed communities of resistance, as well as offer alternatives to the normative practices of political and religious leadership who are complacent in the face of such a violent system. Rebecca Parker, a contemporary Unitarian Universalist theologian, pushes theology to be accountable to the realities of the world we currently live in. Parker writes, "A theology adequate to the realities of violence in our world must speak from the depths of our life experience. It must speak words of anguish and words of hope. The anguish is this: Violence can break our hearts and efface the sacred goodness of life in this world. The hope is this: Love, in its myriad forms, can recall us to life." A theology seeking to address the realities of the prison–industrial complex will call humanity back to our potential for love and life.

For any theology to be relevant to those working against the prison–industrial complex, it must prioritize the experiences of black people, women in particular, and the writings of womanists and black liberation theologians. The fundamental connecting point of all liberation theologies is the prioritization of the experience of the particular theologian's oppressed community as the subject of theological discourse, all of which have a role in shaping a theology relevant in the face of the prison–industrial complex. This means that a theology for the abolitionist movement must be influenced by queers, ecofeminists, black scholars, indigenous organizers, Palestinian freedom fighters, transgender survivors, and all others struggling for liberation.

Katie Canon reflects on some of the gifts that womanism has to offer: "the role of emotional, intuitive knowledge in the collective life of the people. Such intuition enables moral agents in situations of oppression to follow the rule within and not be dictated to from without." This kind of theological and ethical framework is necessary for a theology of resistance. As we choose to distance ourselves from the oppressive (in)justice system, we must still address situations of violence and inequality within our communities. This framework allows for communities considered "outlaw" to center their own morality, creating systems of accountability that prioritize the needs of the community rather than the validity of the state, capitalism, white supremacy, or heteropatriarchy.

A theology that will serve prisoners, anti-prison organizers, and those most impacted by violence must problematize the dichotomy between "good" prisoners versus "bad" prisoners and "violent" versus "nonviolent" convictions. Many "reformist" activists will talk about the need to improve conditions for certain prisoners, such as drug war victims, without seeing the system in its entirety as a problem. Particular prisoners also have to bear the burden of carrying all of our society's sins and being disciplined or crucified for

our communal redemption. The prison–industrial complex operates with a substitutionary theological ethic. Each year, there are hundreds of murders that go unsolved. The murders of poor people, transgender people, youth of color, and people experiencing homelessness are hardly ever prioritized by the police (not that I am suggesting police intervention is the solution). The large majority of perpetrators of sexual violence, from child sexual abuse to adult rapists, are never caught by the police or put through the (in)justice system. According to the Rape Abuse & Incest National Network, fifteen out of sixteen rapists never spend a day in prison.

A relevant theology must learn from Delores Williams' assertions about resisting the surrogacy model of redemption through Jesus Christ. In particular, Williams states that:

> the womanist theologian uses the sociopolitical thought and action of the African-American woman's world to show black women their salvation does not depend on any form of surrogacy made sacred by traditional and orthodox understandings of Jesus' life and death. Rather their salvation is assured by Jesus' life of resistance and the survival strategies he used to help people survive the death of identity.

Those who do not connect particularly with the Jesus story can still see the pattern of social atonement theologies when we place particular "evil" pedophiles on public trials or put a serial rapist behind bars. Public media campaigns vilify and dehumanize the individuals, allowing those who have been victimized without any restitution or experience of justice to see the face of their abuser or attacker in the eyes of the most recent publicly tried murderer/rapist/terrorist. We are able to deceive ourselves that we are dealing with the violence of our society by disciplining those who have less access to expensive attorneys or who a primarily white, class-privileged jury will see as "criminal."

Our communal salvation will not come by utilizing the tools of the prison–industrial complex. This theology must instead encourage us to find our salvation in the resistance and survival strategies developed by those who are the primary survivors/victims of violence. We must prioritize the development of anti-violence strategies that actually deliver us all from the cycle of violence that tears at individuals and communities. The theology must change and let go of atonement and substitution as that will not bring us closer to the universal community, but distract us from the possibility of doing things differently.

A theology relevant to the abolitionist movement must be created in the spaces occupied by those who are impacted by the prison–industrial complex. Theological reflection is not only possible but necessary within prisons, when encountering the police, during a workplace raid by Immigration and Customs

Enforcement, and in any other interaction with the prison–industrial complex. A theology that reveres reason will question the practical implications of the prison–industrial complex. The police claim that cameras on every corner of my neighborhood will make my communities safer, but is my community actually safer? When "tough on crime" politicians claim to be addressing violence in the city, is there actually less violence or does the heavy presence of police simply make the city blocks dangerous places for young people of color? A theology that understands that wisdom and the sacred can be encountered anywhere and through experiences will value the lives of incarcerated people, survivors of state-sanctioned torture, undocumented immigrants, and sex-workers as theologically relevant.

In many religious traditions, the "end times" or some divinely constructed apocalypse will occur when sinfulness and evil have taken over creation. Rebecca Parker suggests that when we look around the world, we may benefit from assuming that the Apocalypse has come, that evil has taken its violent toll on all of creation already. In so doing, theology must respond accordingly. This postapocalyptic theology, writes Hardies and Parker, must manifest responsibly and include the following aspects:

> truthtelling. ... Through our preaching, speaking, and writing, the religious community must provide a clear-eyed description of the world ... salvaging. ... We must become good stewards of history and tradition, identifying vital resources contained in the wisdom of the world's religions and making them available to people who have lost them, including ourselves. ... We must resist stealing from one another and learn what gives us the right in any religious tradition to embrace its gifts. We must stop behaving like spiritual consumers who take for selfish reasons and give nothing back. ... Choosing our guides. We must turn to those who have survived grief, victimization, denial, and paralysis. The guides we should heed are those whom William James called 'twice born,' people who have grappled with suffering, loss and oppression and found a way to survive.

Parker's suggestions for theology pushes us to recognize the importance of respectful sharing in theology and surviving together, an essential realization for the healing needed after suffering the violence of the prison–industrial complex.

The parallels between U.S. chattel slavery and the prison–industrial complex are being discussed in popular writing, including Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*. Because of this relationship, it makes sense to also look at the theologies shaped in slave communities to see what may translate to the movement for abolition today. While there is a supposed separation of church and state in the United States, many in positions of power within the

prison–industrial complex rely on the language of Christianity for justification of their power and discipline of prisoners. During slavery, according to Raboteau:

> Slaves distinguished the hypocritical religion of their masters from true Christianity and rejected the slaveholders gospel of obedience to master and mistress. . . . While white preachers repeatedly urged 'Don't steal,' slaves just as persistently denied that this commandment applied to them, since they themselves were stolen property.

Although a theological praxis of the abolitionist movement may use similar language to that of the power structures within the prison–industrial complex, it does so in a way similar to slaves who reinterpreted the stories of a faith thrust on them by the plantation owning class. "Slaves prayed for the future day of deliverance to come," wrote Raboteau, "and they kept hope alive by incorporating as part of *their* mythic past the Old Testament exodus of Israel out of slavery." When one is locked in solitary confinement for twenty-three hours every day, or when one is forced to work every day for pennies making products for multi-billion dollar corporations, the story of Exodus becomes vital. A theology that liberates the captive and brings freedom to a land of milk and honey could make it so that prisoners fighting for their survival can continue through their days.

The book *Slave Religion* uses the words of Africans held in slavery to explore the spiritual and religious history of resistance. The book includes written record of "slave language" that I am including here. The story of liberation from slavery is not the only aspect of the Exodus story that spoke to slave communities. Thus:

> Old Testament prophecies of the destruction of Israel's enemies easily and naturally fit the slaves' desire that whites suffer just retribution for the brutality of slavery. . . . [After the beating of her daughter by the slave master, Aggy declared,] Oh, Lor'! roll on de chariots, an' gib de black people rest an' peace. Oh, Lor'! gib me de pleasure ob livin' till dat day, when I shall see white folks shot down like de wolves when dey come hongry out o'de woods!

While God did admonish the Israelites for cheering at the deaths of the Pharaoh's army, a theology of oppressed people does not leave aside the fantasy of retribution for the suffering they incurred. A theology of liberation for a mother watching her child be sentenced by a judge will allow her to fantasize about waters crushing down on the courthouse, drowning those who prosecute and imprison her child. The same theology that challenges institutions to release its grip on crucifying individuals can also allow marginalized people to pray in their righteous anger for revenge, as it can foster the strength to survive. The theology of the oppressed and the theology of the privileged

are rooted in different experiences and thus are expected to be different and even contradictory at times. The universal aim of theology need not equalize the approach of all individuals entering into it. The universal aim of theology may be to afflict some while comforting others until the universal community of mutual aid and love is established. It has been said by many, those with power do not give it up willingly—it must be demanded and taken by the oppressed. The theology for those in power, in the context of liberation, is to recognize the humble act of giving up power and becoming a traitor to the systems of privilege.

A theology that serves the movement for abolition and those most impacted by the prison–industrial complex would do well with a strong commitment to prayer. Ivone Gebara, an eco-feminist Catholic theologian, explained that:

> to begin with, praying is a human need, like singing, dancing or listening to music. But it is a human need marked by gratuity and freedom, by the desire to be at one with myself in the presence of the mystery that sustains us all. It is a human need that varies in intensity and from from one person or culture to another. . . . Prayer is our personal and collective preparation for acting in solidarity and respect, for awakening feelings of tenderness and compassion for persons and all living things.

While I was incarcerated, my prayer life became a focal point of my day. Prayer became a practice of recognizing my place as a person in the world and as a spiritual being in relationship with those I loved but was not connected to. Prayer was also a time when I intentionally felt thankful, a practice that was incredibly difficult during my stay in solitary confinement. I was striving to be thankful for the blessing of my breath, blood flowing through my veins, and the incredible people who supported me from the outside. As an abolitionist organizer in the "free world," prayer gives me the time to set out my intention for action to bring us closer to the day of liberation, when we are all saved from the violence of the prison–industrial complex. A praying practice for the abolition movement should embody the prayer structure articulated by Unitarian theologian John Haynes Holmes, as found in *A Free Pulpit in Action*:

> Prayer is attention unfolding into intention. It is purpose, resolution, dedication. Which brings us face to face with the greatest of all spiritual discoveries—that if our prayers are to be answered we must answer them ourselves; that we are already answering our prayers in the mere expression of the desire that they be fulfilled.

The above theological suggestions are only part of the possibility for establishing theological resources that will serve communities impacted by the prison–industrial complex. There are seemingly endless theological perspectives on liberation that can strengthen the movement for abolition. One

of the beauties of liberating theologies is that they can go on and on giving many opportunities to create and discover new ways of engaging the struggle for justice theologically. Any theological approach to challenging the prison–industrial complex must actively engage in interfaith dialogue to best serve the needs of great diversity of beliefs within the movement.

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