The United States is not just a nation with an enormous number of prisons. It is a prison nation. Carceral logics and effects pervade U.S. culture, including in the arguments we make and in the fear and fury we feel. Not all Americans are equally implicated, but none of us is untouched. Just as Clifford Geertz once read from a cockfight a set of collectively shared secrets endemic to and constitutive of Balinese culture, so too in the United States today, careful observers can witness the knot of pathologies rooted in our prisons, pathologies that are also endemic to the politics and culture outside the walls. Mass incarceration contributes to this culture and politics, and it depends on it. A cursory list of our carceral maladies would include racial inequities, brutal class conflict, the violence of rigid gender norms, broken health-care system, hollow rhetoric of rights, the management of bare life, and much more. For our nation the prison is an apt synecdoche, and there’s no way to disentangle the part from the whole. For readers of Abolition, in asserting the preceding we are surely breaking little new ground.

Where we might stir you to surprise or resistance pertains to the issue of religion. Coastal elites and the media they control generally portray a country governed by fundamentally secular ideals, but the majority of our fellow citizens and noncitizens know better. We say this not to trot out statistics showing how many of us believe in God, or to venerate the vantage point of the marginalized millions who do. It is to make a more substantive claim about the ideals and values that motivate Americans to collective action. Namely, the spirit of religion fills to roughly the same degree even those of us who would never be caught dead in a church, so much
so that we are subjects of this great and grotesque nation. American culture is soaked through with religious languages, practices, and themes: redemption, hope, love of neighbor, hate of other neighbor, beloved community, holy crusade. These and other religious tropes are woven into the national cultural fabric, and they furnish the tools by which Americans fashion selves and collectivities. This is true of those who comprise the ruling order, and it is equally if not especially true of those of us who struggle to dismantle that order. Considered in this way, religion then becomes a promise and a problem. In public, private, and in mass mediated spaces, elites frequently repress or carefully manage religion—just as they repress or carefully manage race, gender, sexuality, disability, immigration, and labor, so as to smoothly and seamlessly integrate these sites of potential disruption into the workings of power and flows of capital.

To understand the United States as a prison nation—and to cure the maladies that afflict us—it is imperative that we understand the United States as a religious prison nation, and more specifically, as a Christian prison nation.

How to best approach the religiosity of our prison nation? One route would be to start at the beginning with the familiar story about the religious origins of the prison, the “penitentiary”: a place for penance, a place for reform, a place for redemption. These themes endure, but in this brief intervention, we’d rather start with the present. What role does religion play in sustaining mass incarceration today? What role has religion played in underwriting the explosive growth of prisons over the last four decades? And most crucially, what role does religion have to play in destroying mass incarceration?

Three explanations currently circulate for the rise of mass incarceration, none of which accounts for religion in the least. Let’s call these the race account, the politics account, and the economics account. First, and most seismically, is the framing of mass incarceration as perpetuating a racial caste system. It has been the pull of this political frame, as embodied most influentially in The New Jim Crow phenomenon, that has made “ending mass incarceration” a point of public conversation. Second, mass incarceration is sometimes framed as a political problem, a bipartisan project rooted in ill-conceived ideals and baked through with cynicism and
expediency—a grand public works project collectively executed to the catastrophic detriment of the disenfranchised. At the national level, Nixon developed this game, Reagan and Bush perfected it, and after Michael Dukakis’s shellacking, the Clintons went all in. In the third rendering, mass incarceration is a cunning adaptation to post-industrialization, a corporate and civic profit center and a method for managing an urban underclass. Correctional officers and private prison profiteers are the most obvious examples, but in countless ways the subjugated bodies of incarcerated people have become necessary fuel for keeping the wheels of the economy turning. These three explanations, sometimes in isolation, sometimes braided together, are the stories we tell about why mass incarceration happened and what mass incarceration is essentially about.

The critic Kenneth Burke writes of *terministic compulsion*, the power of compelling explanatory devices to cause those who avow them to stick to their guns, even to their own detriment. So it sometimes seems with the above comprehensive diagnoses. When ossified into ideologies, these blanket diagnoses have the tendency to stifle mass mobilization with their righteous defeatism. When we lash ourselves to the mast of an apocalyptic vision, in which good must confront evil without mercy, ameliorative measures like educating those who are incarcerated, improving prison conditions, restricting solitary confinement, or leveraging austerity politics to shutter a prison or two often seem woefully inadequate. Rather, it is said, we must deal with the depths of the problem: intransigent racism, the stranglehold of neoliberalism, a broken democracy. If these problems are not addressed, prison culture will remain undiminished; indeed, for every marginal “improvement,” some as yet unimagined and more invidious mutation is sure to arise.

Needless to say, we are not unconcerned with systemic injustice on all fronts, including the racial, the economic, and the political. But for combatting prison culture in particular we propose an alternative approach. Yes, prison culture is tied to vexing, deep-seated problems, to original sins and systems of sacrifice. But where the primary mode of political engagement is ideology critique—of diagnosing the “real cause” of the problem—the
possibility for large-scale movement building is limited. Moreover, as we can’t resist but point out, this kind of ideological orientation is animated by a religious spirit, made plausible by background theological concepts of discernment and redemption. If only we can pierce the illusions and identify the right social evils, then we can exorcise the demon. Our souls (and bodies) might then live in peace, our collective soul might be redeemed.

We are suspicious of redemption narratives. We propose, rather, to actively and openly engage with that which—for worse and for better—is inextricable from American life: religious traditions, practices, affects, and communities. By bringing such engagement to analysis of and organizing against American prison culture, we might tap a reservoir of revolutionary resources, and in the process, radically expand our coalition. If it could be shown that religion was intimately involved in enabling exponential prison growth, then we might also imagine how religious languages, practices, and communities may be mobilized to abolish prisons. In this vision, religious communities need not be relegated to one coalition partner in a pragmatic, secular movement for prison reform (one that too often results in Pyrrhic victories). Rather, to the extent that religious dissent represents an essential component of the national cultural fabric, by “getting religion,” contemporary abolitionism unleashes the potential to jar our prison nation. Just as religiously fueled abolitionists transformed the national conversation about slavery in the nineteenth century, so too today an abolitionism doused in religion may be able to revolutionize the public conversation about prisons, and energize the mass movement necessary for eviscerating America’s prison culture.

What might a religious explanation for mass incarceration look like? Here’s a gloss: At the same time the prison populations were beginning to explode a half century ago, American religious culture was also undergoing a dramatic transformation. Membership in liberal Protestant denominations began to nosedive; evangelical and agnostic affiliations shot up. More important than membership numbers was a shift in public discourse: henceforth, liberal Protestantism no longer formed the assumed backdrop of American political culture. Now, religion came to mean an individual’s choice to believe—in a personal God or in no God at all. Before, religiosity
Pervaded American culture and God was thought to work through history. To do the collective work of God, to pursue divine justice, meant to make worldly laws more just—that was the political theology famously expounded not only by Martin Luther King, Jr. but also, for the first half of the twentieth century, by mainstream politicians of all stripes. Now, however, with the focus on personal conviction, divine justice no longer has a place in American politics. Religion’s only place (to the extent that religion has a place) is in the individual’s heart. If on the right, neoliberal economics and neoconservative foreign policy remained constitutive of an alleged divine plan (with pastors rallying the laity to vote accordingly), for liberals God absconded, and to complementarily malignant effect. For the precise duration of mass incarceration, progressive politics has been pursued on a purely secularist plane. For far too long, liberals have been tackling problems rather than pursuing higher ideals. What ideals remained have been hollowed out into thin slogans like Obama’s “hope.” Policy rules, and wonks and administrators are the only ones left at the table. To focus on ideals, and not policies, has become the purview of children and cranks. In such an impoverished landscape, justice as an abstract ideal ceded its existence to the criminal justice system. This system is now everything. Justice has come to mean little more than the proper functioning of the law. This being so, officers of the law—the police, most notably—come to be seen as gods on earth. The cult of law enforcement isn’t merely pernicious; it is, in our view, downright idolatrous.

In short, America doesn’t only have a prison problem, it has a religion problem. While prison culture is inadequately described without sufficient attention to economics, politics, and race, explanations that ignore religion are similarly incomplete. This knot of many strands is what “prison culture” signifies. On which string should we pull? The economic, the racial, and the political all have their promise, but so too, we argue, does the religious. As well, all four also have their perils.

American history is steeped in resources for thinking about divine justice and for interrogating worldly practices that run afoul of God’s law. These religious resources have been essential to American culture, and they remain salient today even as loud professions of personal faith or personal disbelief drown them
out. Even communities seemingly animated by evangelical or secularist commitments are formed by deep, old, rich currents of American religion with strong collectivist potential. It is these currents, these lower frequencies of American religious life to which we must attune ourselves today. The justice we want, the justice we need, is larger than ourselves. Now we must own it, testify to it, and enact it here on earth.

These are the frequencies of abolitionism: as it fought slavery, as it fought segregation, as it has fought patriarchy and homophobia, and as today it is beginning to fight not merely mass incarceration but incarceration as such. Like our abolitionist forbearers declared in the Prophet Isaiah’s name: “to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke”—this is what we will.

As Angela Davis has so persuasively argued, abolition is much more than the singular act of eliminating prisons. Just as America has a prison culture, America also has an abolition culture. Just as American prison culture is religious, American abolition culture is also religious. The spirit of abolition catalyzes social movements. It builds institutions for social democracy. It challenges and reshapes the ways of the world. It addresses concrete injustices but its vision exceeds the pragmatic. It is the spirit of John Brown and Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. To date, it has not sufficiently been the spirit of prison abolitionism. But herein lies the opportunity that we preach. We honor the Black Nationalists, Marxists, and other hard left thinkers and organizers who have made us who we are, and who have kept the abolitionist fire burning throughout this dark era of acute national disgrace. But it’s time for a religious turn.

Today, we invite our comrades on the secular left to provincialize their secularism, just as we invite our religious sisters and brothers to transcend their reformism. We are not calling for abolition theology—whether you believe in God or don’t believe in God isn’t to us the important thing. We are calling for, rather, religion. In an expansive, critical, and practical sense, religion must be woven into the growing prison abolition movement. In righteous struggle, as spiritual revival, let us conjure together the spirit of abolitionism, and let us tumble the prison walls down.
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REFERENCES


