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Book Talk:
*In This Place Called Prison:
Women's Religious Life in the Shadow of Punishment*
by Rachel Ellis
(2023, University of California Press)

Response by Cesraéa Rumpf*
University of Illinois Chicago

* Correspondence should be directed to ellisr@umd.edu (Rachel Ellis), or crumpf@uic.edu (Cesraéa Rumpf).

In This Place Called Prison: Women's Religious Life in the Shadow of Punishment is a beautifully written and rigorously researched book that offers critically important theoretical and methodological contributions for scholarship and practice. Sociologist Rachel Ellis conducted one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Mapleside Prison, a U.S. state women's prison, during which she deeply immersed herself in the day-to-day religious life of the prison. The result is a rich, vivid description and analysis of women's lived experiences of religion in the context of an institution that is designed to isolate and dehumanize.

SYNOPSIS AND MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ellis designed her study to investigate a provocative question about how two powerful institutions – the prison and religion – compete for primacy. As Ellis makes clear, any investigation of carceral control in the United States must seriously consider the centrality of religion to the prison experience. Religion enjoys unique constitutional protections, such that incarcerated people retain the legal right to religious freedom, albeit with restrictions. Perhaps as importantly, religious programming has filled some of the gaps caused by divestment in secular programs as U.S. society and the correctional system turned away from rehabilitative goals. As funding dried up and secular programs ended, religious volunteers continued their work inside. As a result, religious services and programs may be the only programming some incarcerated people access throughout their incarceration.

Mapleside Prison is no different. Ellis explains that while women may spend years waiting for a coveted spot in college classes and other secular programs like beekeeping or service-dog training, they are guaranteed access to religious services and programs. The vast majority of these programs are Protestant, as are the majority of women at Mapleside. Although Ellis observed programming and conducted interviews across a range of religious affiliations, her analysis focuses on Protestant programs and discourses by virtue of their strong presence relative to other affiliations.

Ellis finds that a constant tension persists between the prison and religion, and examines “religion's capacity to offer both *freedom from* carceral control and *constraint within* carceral control” (p. 5, emphasis in original). Poignant examples from her fieldwork illustrate how religion's liberatory capacity is achieved when religious discourses affirm women's humanity and deservingness of God's love, in stark contrast to the prison's dehumanizing, punitive discourses that frame women as dangerous criminals. These hopeful moments are fleeting, however, as Ellis documents the multiple ways religious discourses work in concert with prison discourses, justifying incarceration and punishment as God's way of saving women.

In analyzing this discursive alignment, Ellis develops one of the book's most important contributions: *secondhand carcerality*, defined as "a reiteration of carceral control by a noncarceral actor that occurs via contact with the criminal legal system...[E]ven well-intentioned institutional actors take on punitive logics when they interact with the surveillance, regulation, and coercion of the intractable prison system" (p. 5). Ellis repeatedly shows how secondhand carcerality taints seemingly every moment of hope, humanity, and freedom that breaks through within the prison. Religious volunteers may individualize women and center their humanity, but they offer a constrained humanity. Women are human in so much as the carceral context allows them to be (How human can one feel, for instance, while locked in a cage and subject to strip searches?) and as long as they fit into the constraining redemptive discourses religious volunteers offer.

Ellis's insightful analysis shows how gendered, religious, and carceral discourses intersect to regulate women, especially regarding sexuality and mothering. Religious volunteers drew upon gender-essentialist frameworks to define a good "woman of God" as a woman who marries a "man of God" and submits to her husband (p. 120). Such teachings condemned homosexuality, encouraging some lesbian women to convert to heterosexuality as part of their redemption and conveniently offering religious justification for the prison's rules prohibiting sexual relationships. Gendered religious discourses also infantilized women's mothering abilities. While religious volunteers fell short of outright judging women as "bad mothers," Ellis explains how their assessment of women as incapable of properly caring for their children aligned with overarching carceral discourses that condemn incarcerated mothers as neglectful at best and harmful at worst. Again, the humanity religious discourses offered was constrained.

Secondhand carcerality is an enlightening, widely applicable concept that provides a unifying framework for a wealth of scholarship documenting the perils of social service providers partnering with the carceral state. Such partnerships not only widen the net of who is pulled into the criminal legal system and subjected to correctional supervision, but they also supplant peer-based and harm-reduction orientations with professionalized models that judge, surveil, and criminalize (Hassan, 2022; Schenwar & Law, 2020). Secondhand carcerality also illuminates the corrupting and consuming influence of state power more broadly, beyond formal carceral contexts, and connects to scholarship on the cooptation and professionalization of social movements and grassroots initiatives anchored in revolutionary goals (Kivel, 2017; Richie, 2012). If we can better understand and analyze *how* state power and carceral logics corrupt, we have a fighting chance at undoing their influence.

The strength of Ellis's theoretical analysis directly follows from her rigorous ethnographic methods. She takes readers into Mapleside and gives as much import to the everyday comments and interactions among incarcerated women, religious

volunteers, prison chaplains, and prison staff as she does to the formal rules and processes that determine which religious volunteers gain entry, how women are able to practice their religion, which religious roles women are able to hold, and which benefits those roles confer. Ellis develops three-dimensional, nuanced portrayals of the interiority of women's lives, recognizing women's full and complex humanity in ways neither the carceral nor religious discourses that are the object of her study do. Ellis is an exceptionally skilled, ethical, and transparent ethnographer. Her methodological appendix should be required reading in sociological research methods classes.

QUESTIONS FOR THE AUTHOR

While reading Ellis's gendered analysis of secondhand carcerality, I wanted to know more about if and how race intersected with the constraining religious and carceral discourses women encountered at Mapleside, particularly related to feminine appearance, sexuality, and motherhood. Was race as explicitly referenced as gender by prison staff and religious volunteers? If yes, can Ellis elaborate on how those racial references impacted what she observed? If not, can Ellis offer ideas as to why gender was more salient than race in this carceral setting?

Ellis stresses how necessary it is for scholars and practitioners working in carceral contexts to be critically self-reflexive about their work. Given the strength of secondhand carcerality, does all work in carceral spaces cause some degree of harm and reinforce carceral control? If yes, what is the tipping point, if any? In other words, are there circumstances where researchers, practitioners, and educators should pack up and leave rather than continue to work within carceral spaces? These questions are especially relevant as more college-in-prison programs develop across the country with the reinstatement of Pell grant eligibility for incarcerated students. What lessons does secondhand carcerality hold for educators entering the prison classroom with the intention to co-create with students a humanizing and liberatory space?

Ellis makes clear that good intentions are no match for secondhand carcerality. Still, I wondered if and how religious volunteers' intentions and political orientations mattered. It seemed many of the volunteers at Mapleside were there because it made them feel good about themselves and helped them fulfill their religion's evangelizing imperative. In short, they took a charity approach rather than a critical approach to their work. Additionally, some of the volunteers came off as quite ignorant of how their social privilege impacted the women incarcerated at Mapleside. Ellis beautifully explains how volunteers' carefully cultivated appearances distanced them from the women. Such blatant displays of privilege made me wonder if any volunteers held a structural understanding of inequality and oppression or had thought much about the social causes and consequences of mass

incarceration. Relatedly, might religion – or another institution, such as education – be a strong(er) counter to carceral control if the people practicing it held a critical political analysis of and orientation to the prison as an institution?

Ellis concludes her book with a convincing, urgent assessment: “So long as religion and other institutions operate within an environment of carceral control, we will see the harms of carceral control reinscribed. It is instead the prison itself that requires wholesale change” (p. 181). What does Ellis mean by “wholesale change”? What are potential ways forward that could allow for more moments of liberation and humanity in incarcerated women's lives and minimize the prison's harms?

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Author's Reply by Rachel Ellis University of Maryland

They say that once a book is published, it will be read and interpreted on its own merits—that its author has little opportunity to intervene in subsequent dialogue. So, I am immensely grateful to *IJRR* for the chance to continue the conversation about my book and share some excerpts that had been left on the cutting room floor. Furthermore, it is an honor to engage with such a generous review from Cesraéa Rumpf, whose thinking on the harms of punitive discourses has greatly informed my own.

In This Place Called Prison examines what happens when two institutions, religion and prison, compete for primacy. Both institutions disseminate beliefs about what it means to be punished as a person, as a woman, and as a mother. Both institutions foster internal systems of support and social status, and both institutions imbue material objects with deeper meaning. Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork at Mapleside Prison, I found that the prison context dominated in this competition for institutional primacy. Prison officials had the authority to sort and

select: they decided who could volunteer and had final say on what sorts of religious gatherings were allowed. When religious actors entered the carceral context, they brought with them material objects, messages, and systems of care. Yet they had no choice but to grapple with the prison's own resources, messages, and systems of custody and coercion. Once inside, correctional staff could surveil religious practices, monitor the teachings being disseminated, restrict the use of ritual objects, and disband any activity on the basis of security concerns. Ultimately, religious actors and activities were subject to the institutional primacy of the prison.

Analyzing how religion collides and colludes with the prison context, this book argues that religion offers both *freedom from* and *constraint within* systems of carceral control. This is a “both/and” story. As Rumpf noted, one of the major conceptual contributions pertains to the constraint within systems of carceral control through the mechanism that I call *secondhand carcerality*. It is clear that secondhand carcerality can eclipse what is, for many, a meaningful competing institution – that of religion. After all, as Rumpf has written elsewhere, “the state’s power is not only repressive, but also productive, as it creates subjectivities. In other words, identity is a technology of governance.” She found in her own study of 12-Step logic that “it subjects women to lifelong performances of morality, spirituality, sobriety, and noncriminality and intersects with race, gender, and class” (2023, p. 44).

I have wondered whether the book’s analysis of constraint might overshadow the concurrent analysis of freedom offered by religion. Prison scholars have emphasized the importance of documenting affective dimensions carved out by justice-involved people, including moments of care (Sufrin, 2017) and resilience (Garcia-Hallett, 2022). Religious activities were deeply meaningful for many women at Mapleside. Devout women drew on religion to help make sense of some of life’s hardest moments. They found community through religious practice. They cherished sacred texts and ritual objects. The very real freedoms offered by religion, both tangible and interpretive, were valued as a major part of everyday life in prison. When we examine the sources of narratives and problematize their outcomes, we may conclude that both are true: narratives can be motivating, meaningful, and at the same time have pernicious implications.

Rumpf asked whether there is a tipping point of secondhand carcerality. I think secondhand carcerality is best understood on a continuum. Some institutional actors are more impacted than others. I chose the term “secondhand” because it calls to mind phrases like secondhand smoke, secondhand embarrassment, and secondhand furniture. With secondhand smoke, for instance, anyone in proximity of cigarettes risks secondhand inhalation. Yet in a crowd of smokers, some nonsmokers will be affected more than others based on a combination of their predispositions and the extent of environmental exposure. Likewise, people seem to have different thresholds for when they experience secondhand embarrassment in an awkward

encounter. Secondhand furniture tells a story about its provenance: its materials and craftsmanship describe its makers, and its scuffs and scrapes reveal its use over time. Thus, bringing the “secondhand” metaphor into the severe context of the prison, we find that interrogating secondhand carcerality informs our understanding of the primary harms of carcerality: its origins, processes, and thresholds. If secondhand carcerality reiterates primary harms, can it ever be avoided? In the same way that nonsmokers could try to protect themselves against secondhand smoke, institutional actors working within the prison system could potentially create more or less distance to avoid the toxicity of carcerality.

Educational programs, for one, may have a significant capacity to buffer against secondhand carcerality. Volunteers bringing a framework of liberatory principles may prove an effective antidote. However, as noted, prison officials have discretion in their selective filtering process to sort out prospective volunteers with belief systems that threaten dominant carceral discourses. I spoke with one volunteer who told me matter-of-factly, “the warden shut down [a program]... because they said they didn’t like prison.” Additionally, individuals with a criminal record may find it incredibly difficult, or impossible, to themselves become volunteers. This is troubling, given that “proximity is a gift” (Miller, 2021), and that those closest to the problems of the criminal legal system are also closest to its solutions. Furthermore, there is a supply-side sorting mechanism for unpaid volunteer work. People with time and resources, including predictable work schedules and reliable transportation, may be better positioned to commit to a weekly volunteer position. This stratified access may lead to the socioeconomic profiles of Mapleside volunteers detailed in Chapter 2. So, to answer Rumpf’s question on the sociopolitical orientations of religious volunteers, there are practical and structural barriers that can limit competing possibilities. Nonetheless, while no one working in and around the prison system is completely immune to the harms of carceral control, its impacts can certainly happen by degree.

Prisons are racialized and classed, just as they are gendered. Criminologists have documented the disproportionate representation of Black and Latinx individuals in prison, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, stemming from their overexposure at each stage of the criminal justice process, from policing and arrests to harsher sentencing and disparate parole outcomes. While incarcerated, people are subjected to stereotypes and condemnation based on race and ethnicity (McCorkel, 2013). At Mapleside, women reported being treated differently by race. As one woman described it, “Sometimes there are officers who will let someone do something and then when you try to do the exact thing, they won’t let you. And a lot of times it’s based on race.” Religious activities were no exception. Implicit in messages from religious volunteers about becoming a “woman of God” were hegemonic norms of middle-class whiteness (Ellis, 2018). Normative messages around marriage and motherhood were not only gender

traditionalist, but also rendered invisible the sociocultural and structural realities of Black mothers (Garcia-Hallett, 2022). At other times, religious messages seemed to perpetuate colorblind ideas. As one volunteer pastor commented to a group of incarcerated women, “Do you know that the United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world? ... It’s not racial. It’s not religious. It’s economical. That’s bondage.” Simultaneously, as a “both/and” story, religious activities offered resistance related to race in prison. Mirroring the system of Black Church lay leadership across the U.S., Mapleside’s “church official” roles in religious programs conferred honor, dignity, and self-directed collective identity for incarcerated women of color. Race and ethnicity were central to how religion shaped the meanings and social experiences of incarceration.

Rumpf’s final question may be the most important: how do we move forward? As social scientists, we diagnose problems. The problem I diagnosed in my book is that of secondhand carcerality, and how it spreads through institutions despite their best intentions. Importantly, a critique of how religious activities are implicated in secondhand carcerality is *not* a call to do away with them. People in prison deserve the right to practice their faith. In line with recent work on prison reform (Schenwar & Law, 2020), my findings can be viewed as a cautionary tale. Extensive research shows that prisons are ineffective at rehabilitating people and deterring crime. Instead, prisons (and the ancillary institutions that work in and around them), address the desire for retribution—through deprivation, degraded social status, and narrative harm. We cannot introduce programs into prisons and expect them to be immune to the secondhand perils of carceral control. Once we acknowledge that, the sooner we can work toward practical change. Knowing what is wrong is the first step toward getting it right.

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