



## Ten Tips to De-Carcerate Your Theology, Ethics, or Religion Classroom

Sarah Jobe, Nathaniel Grimes, Vincent Lloyd, Jason S. Sexton, Kathryn Getek Soltis & Mary Beth Yount

To cite this article: Sarah Jobe, Nathaniel Grimes, Vincent Lloyd, Jason S. Sexton, Kathryn Getek Soltis & Mary Beth Yount (2022): Ten Tips to De-Carcerate Your Theology, Ethics, or Religion Classroom, Political Theology, DOI: [10.1080/1462317X.2022.2079238](https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2079238)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2079238>



Published online: 28 May 2022.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 2



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



## Ten Tips to De-Carcerate Your Theology, Ethics, or Religion Classroom

Sarah Jobe, Nathaniel Grimes, Vincent Lloyd, Jason S. Sexton, Kathryn Getek Soltis and Mary Beth Yount

Villanova University, Villanova, PA, USA

### ABSTRACT

The authors offer advice for those teaching about prisons and criminal justice in religion, ethics, and theology contexts. They examine such issues as the use of language about crime and incarceration, the way race and economics can enter the conversation, and the role carceral thinking can play in pedagogy in general. Each piece of advice is accompanied by a list of resources to explore it in more depth.

### KEYWORDS

Prison; crime; Christian ethics; pedagogy; prison reform; prison abolition; abolitionism

Mass incarceration is one of the pressing ethical issues of our time. Yet the idea that prisons, in some form, are an appropriate response to crime is so deeply embedded in our social imagination that it can be hard to teach about prisons at all without inadvertently falling into language and logics that support carceral systems. This guide is an initiative of the Society of Christian Ethics Interest Group on “Christianity and Prison Abolition.” It offers a few ideas and best practices for teaching about prisons in a way that resists deeply embedded carceral language and logics that we might not even know we inhabit. This guide was developed collaboratively by six religion and theology educators who have also spent significant time inside prisons and jails: as teachers, as prison chaplains, and as incarcerated people. Below is our own – hard-won and humbly-submitted – wisdom on ways to speak and think about prisons and incarcerated persons that can help open up collective imagination for the creation of more just and generous responses to human harm and the violation of social contracts (i.e., response to what we often call “crime”). Thank you for taking on these issues in your own teaching, scholarship, and activism.

### Tip 1: Language shapes imagination

Language matters. The ways that we talk about events, people, and social issues—these shape the knowledge that is generated. Sally McConnell-Ginet, in *Words Matter: Meaning and Power*, provides suggestions for “using language recommendations to expand minds.” When we teach, we are trying to expand minds and help our students see beyond the cultural blinders of our current narratives. One way that we can help students, and ourselves, go beyond the false binaries that serve the prison-industrial

complex – good/bad people who are deserving/undeserving, for example – is to change the way that each one of us speaks and thinks about the people involved. We can resist, in our own minds and classrooms, the language that we hear in the media and from law-enforcement and public agencies. Instead of talking about people impacted by the carceral system as “criminals,” “felons,” or “inmates,” we can use person-centered language (incarcerated person, justice-involved person), conveying the humanity of those who are system-impacted.

A brief but informative class reading could be the letter from Eddie Ellis, founder of the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions, who pushed back against the normalization of talking about people as if they are things. As he put it, “Calling me inmate, convict, prisoner, felon, or offender indicates a lack of understanding of who I am, but more importantly, what I can be.” In addition to reading and conversation, we can involve our students in a reflection exercise that activates their imagination and causes them to reflect on their own self-identity and social location. Try asking your class, “Have you ever committed a crime?” After taking answers, then ask, “So are you a criminal?” As civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson has insistently reminded us: just because a person lies or steals does not mean that they are always a liar or a thief. This exercise invites students to investigate assumptions about who might be labeled a criminal and who should not be labeled that way, assumptions that are embedded in and reinforced by our linguistic choices.

## Resources

Center for NuLeadership on Human Justice and Healing. <https://www.nuleadership.org/home>

Michael Cerda-Jara, Steven Czifra, Abel Galindo, Joshua Mason, Christina Ricks, Azadeh Zohrabi. *Language Guide for Communicating About Those Involved in the Carceral System*. Berkeley, CA: Underground Scholars Initiative, UC Berkeley, 2019. <https://undergroundscholars.berkeley.edu/blog/2019/3/6/language-guide-for-communicating-about-those-involved-in-the-carceral-system>

Eddie Ellis. “An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language.” Center for NuLeadership on Human Justice and Healing, 2005. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58eb0522e6f2e1dfce591dee/t/5edf843888a70e79f164a7e9/1591706681221/CNUS+lang+ltr\\_regular.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58eb0522e6f2e1dfce591dee/t/5edf843888a70e79f164a7e9/1591706681221/CNUS+lang+ltr_regular.pdf)

Sally McConnell-Ginet. *Words Matter: Meaning and Power*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

## Tip 2: Break the binaries: victim/offender and social/individual

Crime is never entirely straightforward. Any given crime represents a complex set of relationships between personal choices and social forces that are inherited, supposed, and actively developed. People are not always in prison simply because they made bad decisions; they are often in prison because of the ways that economic need, racial bias, the current judicial system, and other social factors have come to press upon their individual decisions. Even when someone commits a crime according to the law, or harms another person by deliberate or accidental action, it does not necessarily follow that the

person is only, or primarily, an “offender.” Most incarcerated people have also experienced violence and harm done against them (as “victims”), not just within their lives, but actively within the situation that has been designated a “crime.” It is unfortunate that even restorative justice frameworks can often remain locked into a victim-offender binary while failing to realize that all humans are simultaneously both victims and offenders, especially in a theological accounting. While critically important to listen to the voices of those who have endured harm or who have been marginalized and oppressed (the “victims”), even these are not beyond the scope of critical analysis, as if to exhibit and arbitrate an unquestionable source of ultimate truth and reality. Popular media and various social justice efforts have perpetuated these hard binaries. And yet, harm cannot be understood by an entirely individualized or an entirely social account, and people are not entirely “victims” or “offenders.” We are all multifaceted and complex beings with many factors contributing to who we are and what we do. This complexity must be embraced in order to more honestly, responsibly, and truthfully reckon with the dynamic relationship between the individual and the social-collective at work in any given harm.

### Resources

Bryan Stevenson. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: One World, 2014.

Jonathan Simon. *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Sarah Coakley, ed. “The Ethics of State Punishment.” Special Issue of *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27:3 (August 2014): 253–339.

### Tip 3. Get curious about “responses to harm” rather than “punishment for crime”

We have all experienced harm. We have all harmed others. It is part of being human, and we know that. We also have strong intuitions about healthy and unhealthy ways to respond to harm. Resentment, revenge, and escalation are unhealthy ways to respond to harm. Active communication, community transparency, and reparations are healthy ways. What if we understand crime as what it really is: a particular species of harm, designated by a government? Crime differs from other forms of harm not only because it activates state response but also because it activates a certain imagination. When we hear “crime,” we then think, “punishment.” And we think about the state as the one who punishes, with fines and prison being the most implemented of a very short list of approved “punishments” for “crime.” These are terms that shut down imagination for alternative responses to harm that involve broken laws. When we redescribe crime in terms of harm, we open ourselves to a wider range of responses, like those we would want for ourselves or our loved ones when we inevitably have to navigate the harms we do to one another.

By now we are familiar with the arbitrariness with which certain acts are designated crimes - designations that are sometimes worse than arbitrary, targeting the economically disadvantaged, racial minorities, and the socially marginalized. While at a level of abstraction, the language of “punishment for crime” may seem straightforward, when

we turn to the real world, we quickly notice that such language draws our attention to, and exaggerates, the harms caused by those with relatively little power. The language of “responses to harm” invites us to explore the complexity of the human condition, in ourselves and in those around us. It invites us to think in terms of restoring community and ensuring accountability.

### Resources

“Transforming Harm: Experiments in Accountability” <https://bcrw.barnard.edu/event/transforming-harm-experiments-in-accountability/>

Erin Kelly. *The Limits of Blame: Rethinking Punishment and Responsibility*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

Joshua Dubler and Vincent W. Lloyd. *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

“Toward Transformative Justice: A Liberatory Approach to Child Sexual Abuse and Other Forms of Intimate and Community Violence” [https://www.transformativejustice.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/G5\\_Toward\\_Transformative\\_Justice.pdf](https://www.transformativejustice.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/G5_Toward_Transformative_Justice.pdf)

### Tip 4: Bring the historical into the ethical: what are prisons for?

There is no clear or agreed upon purpose for the prison today. Are prisons meant for punishment? Deterrence? Reform and rehabilitation? Prisons warehouse various societal undesirables who have been unfortunately (or justly, depending who is asked) swept up into a symbolic instrument of punishment. Universal agreement on the purpose of prisons cannot be found, but some historical facts about prisons are clear and would benefit from more time in classroom discussions about the ethics of incarceration. For instance, in the modern era prisons arose as a failed Protestant social experiment now operating in the hands of the state (Graber, *Furnace of Affliction*). Prisons have always been linked to profit and labor in various forms (McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*). Prisons must be fiscally convenient and must benefit their communities, both local and among the wider society. These fiscal concerns have been structured and regulated with racial, ethnic, and sexual power at work and have also been particularly oppressive toward the disabled, immigrants, and others deemed miscreants. For-profit prisons have especially highlighted the disturbing nature of punishment for profit, although these prisons are functionally similar to their state government counterparts. Meanwhile, those whose work is exploited within these institutions (like incarcerated California firefighters) have no guarantees of meaningful employment upon release, highlighting the contradictions inherent to the system. In considering the ethics of incarceration, we encourage you to consider the functional economic roles that prisons have actually played in addition to the theoretical roles that prisons might perhaps play (punishment, rehabilitation, public safety, etc.).

### Resources

Jennifer Graber. *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

Rebecca M. McLennan. *The Crisis of Imprisonment: Protest, Politics, and the Making of the American Penal State, 1776–1941*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Robert A. Ferguson. *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Laura I. Appleman. “Deviancy, Dependency, and Disability: The Forgotten History of Eugenics and Mass Incarceration,” *Duke Law Journal* 68 (2018): 417–478.

### Tip 5: Center and complexify racial bias

It is crucial to understand the way that systems of anti-Blackness, including slavery and segregation, continue in today’s prison system. The leading voices for segregation became the leading voices to criminalize more activities, to expand police forces, and to build more prisons. It is also crucial to understand that incarceration and anti-Blackness are not the same thing: the prison system is complicit in a variety of racial formations, and factors beyond race affect incarceration rates. We must appreciate the continuities between the current prison system and asylums where the mentally ill were incarcerated, workhouses where the poor were incarcerated, and Indian boarding schools where Native American children were incarcerated. We must remember that the origins of policing were not only in slave patrols but also in strike-breakers and in the control of the working class. Moreover, today there are unmistakable lines of continuity between immigration detention practices and the prison system. There are growing numbers of white women incarcerated at the state level, and growing levels of Hispanic people incarcerated at the federal level. Across all racial groups, those who are poorer are more likely to be incarcerated. Understanding the role of anti-Blackness in fueling the prison system makes it urgent to challenge that system. Adding complexity to narratives about race and prisons shows the way that prisons are negatively impacting a wide variety of people and broadens the constituency for challenging the prison system.

### Resources

Vesla Weaver. “Frontlash: Race and the Development of Punitive Crime Policy,” *Studies in American Political Development* 21:2 (Fall 2007), 230–265.

Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration and the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.

Jennifer Graber. “Natives Need Prisons: The Sanctification of Racialized Incarceration,” *Religions* 10:2 (2019), <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/2/87>

“Incarceration of Women and Girls,” The Sentencing Project <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>

### Tip 6: Teach patterns, not exceptions

Students, like all of us, arrive in the classroom primed with considerable exposure to stories of crime, whether from news, entertainment media, personal experience, or some combination of the three. Few of those sources are conveying big-picture, representative data, and so imagination is often anchored in cases that are particularly grievous or

sensational. It is incumbent on the instructor to name and consciously resist this dynamic. Students may ask, “What about mass murderers?” when alternatives to incarceration are discussed, but a focus on small minorities in the carceral population cannot be allowed to dominate and derail discussion. Instead, direct the conversation to the patterns that speak to the statistical majority of who is in prison and how prison is used. Refuse the simplified assumption that prisons keep us safe from the most menacing situations we are able to imagine. Contend with the realities that prisons lock up people from predictable demographics at the end of predictable stories, marked by racial injustice, poverty, sexual violence, and more. The carceral system is indeed a system and can therefore neither be understood nor justified by outliers. Even the language can obscure the realities. For example, the offense of murder includes the very small number of persons convicted of serial murder along with those who have committed acts that are unlikely to ever be repeated as well as those who were connected to a felony (e.g., as a lookout for a robbery in which a person was accidentally killed). Invite students at the start to suspend discussion of the most troubling, exceptional cases, and insist that the class will first approach the full, wide reality of imprisonment. Once you have given due space to wrestling with normative carceral patterns, trust that you will then be equipped to think about appropriate responses to the small number of human beings who might actually pose a persistent threat to others.

### **Resources**

Prison Policy Institute, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2022” <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html>

The Sentencing Project, “Criminal Justice Facts” <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

### **Tip 7: Treat prisons and incarcerated people as they are treated by the biblical text and the person of Christ**

In the theology and ethics classroom, we often approach prisons as sites for reflection on the ethics of incarceration or as sites to embark on mission, service, justice, or evangelism. Yet the biblical texts also present prisons as prioritized sites for receiving divine revelation. For the Abrahamic traditions, prisons are sites from which God’s prophets, Messiah, and apostles accomplish the work that God gave them to do as incarcerated people. Biblical characters like Samson, Joseph, Jeremiah, Paul, and Peter spend significant time imprisoned. Some biblical texts were written from inside of prisons, including portions of Jeremiah, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and The Book of Revelation. Jesus himself was arrested, put on trial, found guilty of sedition, and sentenced to execution. The resurrection narratives are descriptions of Jesus’ first week home after his incarceration; Jesus inhabits the roles of incarcerated person, executed person, and returning citizen. Attention to the prioritized role of prisons and incarcerated people in the biblical traditions calls for a re-orientation of our own conversations about prisons to prioritize incarcerated voices and wisdom from within prisons, just as the biblical text itself does.

## Resources

Sarah Jobe. “Carceral Hermeneutics: Discovering the Bible in Prison and Prison in the Bible,” in *Carceral Intersections*, Special Issue of *Religions* 10:2 (2019).

Ryan Schellenberg. *Abject Joy: Paul, Prison, and the Art of Making Do*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Jens Soering. *The Convict Christ: What the Gospel Says About Criminal Justice*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.

## Tip 8: Be aware of “red flag theologies”

The United States has deep connections between Christianity and the formation of its social and political structures. The American prison system was deeply formed by well-meaning Christians, both at its foundation and at various crucial moments of reform as described by both Jennifer Graber and Tanya Erzen. Because of this, there are some theologies that are woven into the fabric of how prisons work. How can we help our students recognize religious agendas that promote destructive social hierarchies when those theologies are presented as normative and ideal?

Authoritarian “law and order” tactics such as those Jason Stanley points to in *How Fascism Works* buttress carceral thinking. Christian nationalism, the promotion of patriarchal families as ideal, and theologies of salvation that promote death as punishment for sin also align with the idea that imprisoning wrong-doers (or killing them) is appropriate when conducted in legally sanctioned ways. Sometimes it is hard for us to see this in our own lives, so watching and discussing these themes in the movies listed in the blog post by Jean Magner could help students step outside of their own perspectives and identify some of the themes in the movies prior to reflecting on their own experiences with these same themes. Students can engage with the resources below to learn how to look critically at religion in the United States and identify the many ways that policing and controlling the behavior of others through punishment—especially that of the undesirable others—have become part of our religious and social way of life in America.

## Resources

Tanya Erzen. *God in Captivity: The Rise of Faith-Based Prison Ministries in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2017.

Jean Magner. “10 Examples of Theocracy in Movies: Religion-State Authoritarianism at Work” <https://www.altfg.com/film/examples-of-theocracy>

Jason Stanley. *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*. New York: Random House, 2018.

## Tip 9: Create a container for conversations about harm

Fruitful classroom conversations about harm require a stance of humility and curiosity. We often employ words like “justice” and “crime” as if they denote easily intelligible concepts. Yet, thoughtful examination quickly reveals that these seemingly obvious terms encompass a wide and often conflicting range of definitions and associations. It is a



more authentic starting place to presume we do not know what words mean, how crime works, or what the best response to harm might be. This is the disposition of humility which should be paired with that of curiosity. Curiosity replaces certainty with a posture of wonder and the desire to be a learner. While these dispositions ultimately require long-term cultivation, an instructor can create a container for difficult conversations by signaling expectations for listening, openness, and empathy. Among the possible tools for this work is the framework of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) as developed by Marshall Rosenberg. In a simplified form, the NVC technique invites persons to either ask about or express fundamental feelings and needs. Nonviolent communication avoids judgment words that provoke defensiveness and resists the structural violence inherent even in our communication. A key assumption of NVC is that all human actions are attempts to meet needs. Related to this, NVC understands feelings to point to whether needs are met or unmet. The practice of unmasking foundational human needs will create a space for deeper listening and greater connection across difference in both the context of the classroom conversation itself and in the urgent work of examining dynamics of harm and punishment.

### Resources

Sara Koopman and Laine Seliga. "Teaching peace by using nonviolent communication for difficult conversations in the college classroom," *Peace and Conflict Studies* 27:3 (2021). <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol27/iss3/2>

Marshall Rosenberg. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015, 3rd edition. More information about NVC can be found at the Center for Nonviolent Communication, [cnvc.org](http://cnvc.org)

### Tip 10: Notice carceral thinking in the academy

"The parental ethos of academic bodies filters professionalism and conformity into activism; and veils inherent contradictions." - Joy James, "7 Lessons in 1 Abolitionist Notebook"

One need not be a convinced Foucauldian to observe similarities between schools and prisons or to inquire into how our collective training structures convey the same ideas and practices we see embodied throughout carceral society. Classrooms can be dynamic spaces for conversations about harm, yet carceral logics permeate our practices and understandings of education. Many teachers report their students displaying fear of punishment and fear of making mistakes in the process of learning. De-carceralizing the classroom may naturally include explicit critical analysis of themes of punishment and criminalization, but these issues should also be addressed in course practices and policies. Displays of professorial or institutional authority and assertions of physical and technological control which degrade and isolate are too often taken for granted or justified in pursuing the noble ends of emancipatory education. The distributions of power and prestige afforded by academic institutions can be enticing, but the effects that business as usual have on communities in and out of the classroom must be challenged, so that de-carceralization is not just a course theme but an ongoing collaborative practice.

## Resources

Michael J. Coyle and Methchild Nagel, eds. *Contesting Carceral Logic: Towards Abolitionist Futures*. New York: Routledge, 2022.

Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein. "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation." *Abolition University*, 2019. <https://abolition.university/invitation/>

The Education for Liberation Network & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective. *Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2021.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Sarah Jobe* is Co-Director of Prison Studies at Duke University Divinity School and a prison chaplain through Interfaith Prison Ministry for Women.

*Nathaniel Grimes* is a doctoral student in Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University.

*Vincent Lloyd* directs the Center for Political Theology at Villanova University.

*Jason S. Sexton* is a visiting research scholar at the California Center for Sustainable Communities, at UCLA.

*Kathryn Getek Soltis* directs the Center for Peace and Justice Education at Villanova University.

*Mary Beth Yount* is Associate Professor of Theological Studies at Neumann University.