

Book review

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Joshua Dubler and Vincent W Lloyd, *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020: 256 pp. (including index), ISBN: 978-0-1909-4915-0, \$35.00 (hbk)

Written by two religion scholars, *Break Every Yoke* is a wide-ranging profile of religion's significance to prison abolitionism. Focused on American mass incarceration, and critical of the secular state's options as well as ongoing calls for prison reform, the book argues that religion is not only helpful in the abolitionist effort, but essential—carrying with it more radical visions capable of leveling the current prison system. Beyond a utilitarian vision, Dubler and Lloyd understand that mass incarceration emerged in the same cultural moment as the big box store and megachurch. Thus they seek to present not only how religion can assist abolitionism, but also how religiously-inclined prison reformers ought to embrace abolitionism as the only way to meaningfully address the prison problem. Committed unequivocally to prison abolitionism (emphatically: not reform), the authors illustrate visions of how the modern world might be remade if deeper, more radical religious roots are drawn from and appropriated. These roots hail not from the litany of secular approaches to mass incarceration, they argue, nor from carefully curated and often repressed domesticated forms of religion, but from the fervor of genuine religious faith; or, they curiously suggest: at least 'something closely related to religious faith' (p. 10).

The book's passionate argument and plea is that 'without getting religion—and igniting whole religious communities with abolitionist fire—prison abolition will never acquire its necessary force' (p. 11). The first chapter opens with this argument, accepting nothing less than full-blown prison abolitionism as the only possible way to rethink the prison, with the assumed necessity of incarceration being so deeply ingrained into today's understandings of justice. Lest the argument for abolitionism—shutting down every jail and prison—seem superficial or mere posture, the book's core (chs. 2–4) provides historical exposition fleshing-out what the authors call 'the spirit of abolition.' The exposition carries insights into rationale from normative theological views and material expressions of religion, with the authors claiming to be working not as historians proper, but as scholars of culture, of religion, and as genealogists. This shapes the book's argument, charting how the Civil Rights Era's political pressures once required religious fervor supported by theological arguments. But these vanished after the Civil Rights Era, giving rise to the 'political theology' that built mass incarceration. This political theology in America

watched Protestant concepts of justice swiftly depart amid the 1968 Omnibus Crime Bill—the law morphing into a total secular entity and remaining so in bipartisan-style to the present.

Whether Quaker, Evangelical, Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, Indigenous, &c., the book showcases movements of resistance against the carceral regime. Acknowledging that while ‘formal ecclesial structures may not be the best place to find the abolition spirit at its fullest,’ church leaders were nevertheless not in lockstep with mass-incarceration logic like political leaders were. Church leaders, on the other hand, largely failed to fully embrace Dubler and Lloyd’s idea of the abolitionist spirit, grounded in ‘grassroots practices of organizing against domination’ (p. 111). While religion and the secular in the late twentieth century provided new forms of ‘spirituality,’ in many ways these stripped religion of its inherent radical abolitionist force. This force was seen in Mennonite Howard Zehr’s theological thinking about ‘restorative justice,’ where a covenantal notion indicates a primary relationship between God and people, while the state takes a secondary provisional role. Or in leaders like Evangelical Charles Colson and Prison Fellowship, with an early presence at the International Conference on Penal Abolition. While viewing Prison Fellowship as abolitionist may be a stretch, Colson was nevertheless among those who endorsed the ICPA conference, even before mainline Christian groups did, and well before religion was inched out of ICPA to favor a more secular agenda. Colson’s partiality for ‘restorative justice’ over abolitionism more consistently reflected his theological individualism, addressing ‘crime’ in the lives of individuals in order to work for a restored social order.

Acknowledging Evangelicals’ penchant for prison reform, Dubler and Lloyd understand formal religious institutions as peripheral to the action. The more informal—including Indigenous religions—held out hope with far more consequence than the religious institutions did. Efforts like those from Northern California’s Yurok people are preferred, with their unique, localized, culturally-resonant approaches to justice. Yurok wellness courts were deemed by one analysis to be a jurisprudential spiritual revolution (p. 138). Yet despite favoring the informal, Dubler and Lloyd acknowledge that religion and theology’s transformative ideas need ‘institutional power’ to bring about the justice of a better moral vision.

The book’s final historical chapter (ch. 4) highlights even more radical religious traditions active in the abolitionist cause. In groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Church of the New Song and its so-called ‘religion,’ and the pantheistic revolutionary organization ‘MOVE’ (which was denied federal protection as a religious group under the First Amendment), a new religious mood had arisen, which Dubler and Lloyd call ‘abolitionist religion’—‘nurtured in collective struggle within and against an oppressive system it vows to destroy’ (p. 160). State pushback, however, with Protestant and secular justifications used whenever suitable, had ways of suppressing and disappearing these forms of religion.

Reaching into Winni Sullivan’s engagement with Iowa’s Innerchange Freedom Initiative (a Prison Fellowship affiliate) in her book *Prison Religion*, the question arises whether religious believers maintain ground to critique the law and system at all. This is pertinent if the abolitionist vision is to embrace a duty to fight and win, as

Sanyika Shakur saw as its only aim in his freedom pursuit through the Black radical tradition (p. 180). Such a vision entails a relentless struggle, until the new reality of freedom arrives and the new world comes about, however utopian this may seem. Throughout these descriptions of movements and people, presenting a running through radical religious movements standing in close relationship to (and often within) the prison, the book seeks to identify something new, existing right on the edge of the religious and political. As the argument develops in the book's final chapter, the authors transition from text-analysts to social-scientists, interviewing several important figures who are working at ground level to bring their religious faith to bear in many different ways, highlighting the intensification of the complexities of these political and religious movements.

Dubler and Lloyd don't see everything as thoroughly abolitionist, but they do see the spirit of abolition abounding, virtually ubiquitous. Not only early Charles Colson, but Michelle Alexander counts. While critical of the notion of 'spiritual' as a secular concept, they simultaneously embrace others' 'spiritual-not-religious' views, or the Shakers' naturalistic spiritual vitalism, or Kemis 'Ghani' Songsters' interreligious spiritual system. They acknowledge this slippage as intentional, having chosen to err on the 'inclusive side' of things (p. 225). No sacramental view is developed to do the intellectual heavy-lifting—the prison is still viewed as a terrible device needing to be torn down and done away with entirely—and so the argument may seem to lack consistency and coherence. Their vision might be best understood as offering dialogically-generative hope, which they see in their subjects of inquiry. Bowman understands abolitionism as having a lot to say to theology (p. 205), which indicates an open dialogue, not a monologue. And yet vigilant watch is maintained on 'the devious adaptability of the carceral state' (p. 226).

While Dubler and Lloyd showcase their lucid grasp of the theologies and inner conceptual contours of the particular groups and movements they describe, their own proclivities seem largely secular, which may still have religious impulses. But is their vision possible to achieve in this life? The main thrust of Christian eschatology (the study of 'last things') is that divine action will one day bring about ultimate justice irrefutably. Until then all logic, planning, and actions are subject to incompleteness, imperfection, and failure. Self-aware toilers in the field are often highly aware of their role in the current efforts, and limitations, and intervene accordingly. Dubler and Lloyd acknowledge the sinister nature of a neoliberal order in which the prison operates, feeding upon virtuous intentions of justice workers who operate with special insights and blindnesses from close proximity to the system (p. 219). Dubler and Lloyd's personal moving 'Concluding Meditations' (pp. 235–240) highlight the significance of empathic organizing in close contact with the prison. And they detail how organizing around prison abolition and for the sake of current and formerly incarcerated people has morphed each's vocation in transformative ways that have fanned their passion and labors for a movement they wish everyone to join.

My concern about the book is not in their apparent effort to straightjacket so many people and perspectives into one uniform notion—the so-called spirit of abolitionism. I am sympathetic with their desire to do so. But perhaps my greatest concern is with the entire project laid out by prison abolitionists. In spite of everything, the notion of abolition here is one that could just as easily be coopted by the state, using religion to do so in

ways that may not actually allow these radical efforts to change the game in ways that resist alternate carceralities. It seems to me that abolitionism is very ripe for state adoption, especially in evidentiary-based ways recently laid out in, say, Bagaric, Hunger, and Svilar (2021). Yet theological modes of grappling with the prison today (e.g. Millie, 2021) continue to ignore abolitionism, and some of our most serious abolitionists (e.g. see *Harvard Law Review* special issue on Prison Abolition, April 10, 2019) show virtual zero regard for religion or theology. Yet here is precisely where abolitionism so desperately needs religion and theology both for interpreting the prison genealogically and for alternatives to the modern prison.

Break Every Yoke's contribution to the current moment is hard to overstate. Beyond Dubler's earlier ethnographic work, and Lloyd's philosophy of religion and political theology work, this book provides the kind of intervention into the conversation that scholars from many disciplines studying the prison have needed for some time, crushing the secular approaches that so easily play handmaid to state carceralities; meanwhile they successfully bring religious language and theological concepts face-to-face with the failed theological social experiment of the modern prison.

In the end, while the authors write for several audiences, the book's argument will be most salient for abolitionists, who are often atheistic but with these accounts may see that religious believers have both shared in the 'spirit of abolitionism' historically, and may be collaborators in today's cause of ending mass incarceration. Getting believers on board with the abolitionist cause is the harder sell. The modern prison draws its DNA from Christianity, so much that it is difficult for believers to imagine a world without the modern prison apparatus. On the other hand, the manifold argument for prison abolition is so persuasive that it really should be adopted wholeheartedly and universally if assurance can be given about just one thing: that the abolitionist argument cannot be co-opted by the state for the extension of its authority in new, more penetrating ways.

The alternative to abolition in the state's hands would almost certainly be more frightening than what has already been built. When it comes, where will the strong abolitionist voices go, who have not entirely articulated better plausibility structures for a new order of things *after* abolition? My question is not entirely a rejection of the sweeping argument for prison abolition, although full-blown subscription to prison abolition seems premature, especially as the ideological bar is lowered to accept nearly all contemporary megaphones: having popularized the broken windows crime theory, even writer Malcolm Gladwell claims to be 'very close to thinking that no one should ever go to prison.'

In offering a critical rebuff to the siren song of prison abolitionism, I hope that my critical reading of Dubler and Lloyd's argument may yet add another component to their 'spirit of abolition.' Religious believers from all kinds of traditions may especially look more carefully into and draw more directly from their own theologies, with attendant views of humanity, community life and transformation, and views of history that maintain tensions while actively laboring for justice. These insights may yet assist the discovery of even better resources for the work of communal accountability, integrity, personal redemption, and kinds of hope that both elicit and subversively fulfill the forms of correction and transformation that the modern prison aims for but ultimately can never bring about.


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