

Introduction

Asabi was 18 years old when she and a few friends plotted a robbery.¹ They would enter a bar, flash a gun, and leave with cash. But that night, things did not go according to plan. A bartender was killed. Asabi was not the person holding the gun. Nor was she the person who pulled the trigger. Asabi was sentenced to 30 years in prison as an accomplice to this crime.

Nearly two decades later, I met Asabi at Mapleside Prison, a state women's correctional facility on the East Coast of the United States. "I grew up in here," she motioned, her upright posture making her look taller than her 5'2" frame. Prior to the robbery-gone-wrong, Asabi's life was not easy. Her childhood was marked by sexual abuse and family strain. The racially segregated city of her youth was hollowed out by economic divestment and policymakers' neglect, offering little in the way of resources to low-income Black neighborhoods like hers. Now in her mid-30s, Asabi has spent nearly half her life in prison.

Asabi explained that for years, she reckoned with the night of the murder. Was she "as guilty as the person who actually *did* the

killing?” she wondered aloud. Asabi said she eventually came to terms with the events that changed her life—the events that fated her to incarceration until nearly 50 years old. “Now I realize I am just as responsible,” she continued, in carefully measured words. Her face drawn with regret, Asabi declared, “I don’t want you to think that we are consumed by this [imprisonment]. We are free.” Asabi’s voice resounded against the cavernous room cast in concrete. “We are grateful for the freedom that God has allowed in this place called prison.”

Religion has powerfully transformed Asabi’s life behind bars. Throughout her sentence, Asabi experimented until she found a religion that felt right. She came to be a devout Baptist, firmly believing that forgiveness and salvation come from accepting Jesus Christ as Lord. “It’s been a process,” she conceded, “but now I can say I am finally free. I know the *only* thing I can’t do is walk out that gate.” Asabi gestured toward the towering gates wrapped in razor wire that kept her locked in. Nurturing her identity as a “child of God,” Asabi went on to explain that her religious beliefs shape how she views her purpose in life. “I talk to God, and I know He loves me. I trust Him. I am God’s child—I wouldn’t change my life for anything.”

Her words struck a chord. *For anything?* I wondered how many of us could so reverently say the same. In a cold, sterile room inside a crowded prison, not one moment unguarded, Asabi spoke words I would hear repeatedly throughout my year of ethnographic research spent observing and interviewing women at Mapleside Prison: she cared deeply about “making something out of her incarceration.” What is more, her words matched her actions. Other women condemned to years, decades, or even a lifetime at Mapleside respected Asabi’s sincere faith and described her devotion to God’s transformative love. One friend said that Asabi “is nothing but truly spiritual,” while another nicknamed her “the little pastor,” seeing her as a role model for other Christians in the facility. Nearly 20 years into her sentence, religion offered Asabi a feeling of freedom in an environ-

ment designed to regulate her every move. With a serene smile, she remarked, “When God looks at us, He sees who we truly are.”

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Maria’s experience with religion tells another story. If she serves every day of her 25-year sentence, Maria will leave prison at age 70. Like Asabi, Maria is a Black woman and a devout Baptist. In fact, Maria is so active in Protestant activities at Mapleside that the chaplain entrusted her to lead some of the programs herself. But religion functioned differently for Maria compared to Asabi.

“I don’t care if they carry me out or if I walk out of here,” Maria vowed. “All I want is that eternal life.” When we met seven years into her incarceration, she said she has come to peace with the question “Why am I here?” Maria shared another refrain I would hear over and over again: “I’ll get out in God’s time.” Rather than a freeing way to rise from incarceration, however, Maria’s active participation in Protestant programs offered a framework that helped her embrace the logic of rehabilitation.

It was an unseasonably warm October afternoon when I observed Maria’s class on Christian discipleship. With permission from the chaplain, Maria teaches a weekly course to recently born-again women—or “babes in Christ” as she calls them—on how to become good Christian disciples. The day before brought with it apocalyptic weather: the sun went dark, the winds howled, and the skies opened. Hearing news of a tornado warning, the women confined to Mapleside could do little else but pray the same towering walls holding them in would be strong enough to withstand the cruel storm.

Maria described peering through the narrow sliver of a window in her cell, wondering who would “make it.”

Yvonne, a student in the class, chimed in. She recounted that during the storm, she got down on her knees and prayed: “Lord, I thank you. I repent now for all my sins.”

Maria immediately admonished Yvonne. “Does that *work*? Can we just ask Him to forgive us when it look like the end is near?” For Maria, being a true disciple of Christ was more than having faith in the end times—day-to-day behavior must also be godly. “Unbelievers are looking at us 24 / 7. Everybody who come in here preaches that. We *got* to follow the rules,” she chided. As I would soon learn, outside volunteers coming from local churches to preach the gospel routinely insisted that being a good Christian woman meant behaving like a role model, whether in prison or not. Maria pointed toward the sky as she asked, “If I can’t be obedient to the rules of the prison, how can I be obedient to *Him*? ”

As other students murmured in agreement, Yvonne jumped in again, this time to corroborate Maria’s point: “The Bible says, Be obedient to your masters.” She was referring to the New Testament verse Ephesians 6:5, which reads, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.”² Hearing this, my mind began to inventory the legal scholarship describing incarceration as “American slavery, reinvented.”³ At the same time, I remembered the vital role of Black Church activism in the abolition of slavery.⁴ The tension was apparent. Next to Asabi’s sense of freedom, religious teachings seemed to guide Maria, Yvonne, and others to a monastic sort of rule-adherence and constraint. Effectively, their religious expression was about self-enforcement of the prison’s rules—a personal and pedagogical practice that dovetailed with the contours of carceral control. Maria’s words bear repeating: “If I can’t be obedient to the rules of the prison, how can I be obedient to *Him*? ”

This book is an effort to shine a light on the tension between freedom and constraint experienced through religion in prison. To understand these nested institutions, I spent a year researching religious life inside Mapleside Prison. Several days per week, I conducted ethnographic observations, cataloguing the intricacies of hundreds of women’s daily lives and religious activities. Roughly

two-thirds of the women at Mapleside are Protestant Christians, and while I will occasionally discuss the beliefs and practices of other faiths, this book focuses on the dualities revealed in Protestant religious adherence. Recall Asabi's poignant remark regarding "the freedom that God has allowed in this place called prison" and hold it beside Maria's proposition, "If I can't be obedient to the rules of the prison, how can I be obedient to *Him*?" As Asabi and Maria's words so clearly illustrate, their religion and the freedom it offers are inescapably bound by the coercive environment of carceral control.

I chose to begin with Asabi and Maria's stories because they demonstrate religion's capacity to offer both *freedom from* carceral control and *constraint within* carceral control. On the one hand, religion offers a competing set of norms, practices, and values with the potential to displace the norms, practices, and values of prison and undermine its coercive aims. The chapters that follow will demonstrate how Protestant religion—the most active and dominant faith tradition at Mapleside—is a resource for dignity, humanity, and social support. In this respect, religion jockeys with the carceral system for institutional primacy by redefining key aspects of the meaning and social experience of incarceration. On the other hand, religion cannot fully free women from the environment of coercive control in which they live because religious practice itself does not escape its placement within an ultimately penal setting. In these conditions, religion ends up reinforcing some of the aspects of carceral control it seeks to undermine—this is a process I call *secondhand carcerality*. Secondhand carcerality is a reiteration of carceral control by a noncarceral actor that occurs via contact with the criminal legal system. Secondhand implies an indirect manifestation, an unavoidable and even unintentional reissuing of a primary force by a subordinate but ostensibly separate force. Through this process, we will see how even well-intentioned institutional actors take on punitive logics when they interact with the surveillance, regulation, and coercion of the intractable prison system.

RELIGION AND PUNISHMENT IN AMERICA

Historians tell us that religion has long been entwined with punishment in the United States. Despite what we might imagine given the country's constitutional emphasis on the separation of church and state, religious practice is not peripheral to the carceral experience but rather embedded in the very foundation of North American prisons as we know them today.

In the colonial era, European settlers adapted Western penal models of corporal punishment, stocks and pillories, fines, banishment, and gallows. Jails functioned as mere holding facilities prior to punishment being meted out. Later, incarceration became the punishment itself. Contrary to what we might think today, prison was designed as a more humane alternative to hew closer to Christian ideals of penitence and benevolence. One of the world's first penitentiaries, Eastern State, was built in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1829.⁵ Linked with Quaker principles of moral contrition and self-reflection, its prisoners spent 24 hours a day alone in their cells. They were given nothing but food to eat and a Bible to read. A singular skylight built into every cell, meant to symbolize the watchful "eye of God," evoked the panopticon model of control—keeping cell occupants under constant, yet unverifiable, surveillance.⁶ In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville and French magistrate Gustave de Beaumont toured the nation's prisons, describing: "In America, the progress of the reform of prisons has been of a character essentially religious. . . . So also is religion to this day in all the new prisons, one of the fundamental elements of discipline and reformation."⁷ Religion was central to the logic and structure of the penitentiary, just as it was central to its new purpose: the process of moral transformation to be achieved through religious reflection.⁸

Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, all of this was explicit and overt.⁹ "It is not accidental," scholar and activist Angela Davis writes, "that most of the reformers of that era were deeply religious and therefore saw the architecture and regimes of

the penitentiary as emulating the architecture and regimes of monastic life.”¹⁰ Decade after decade, U.S. religious leaders actively sought prison reform of various kinds. Historian Jennifer Graber describes how, preceding the Civil War, Protestant beliefs around moral redemption through physical suffering were used to justify harsh prison conditions, including physical discomfort and corporal punishment in the name of rehabilitation,¹¹ while others document how, decades later, prison reformers working to instate a “kinder, gentler” form of punishment, particularly for women, drew on Christian beliefs about femininity and motherhood.¹² The politics of punishment in the twentieth century were profoundly shaped by evangelical Christian leaders and missionary groups, who took an active role in promoting “tough on crime” policies and colorblind criminal legal reforms.¹³ Whether religious activists hoped to make prisons more austere and punitive or more instructive and rehabilitative, it seems they called on the Bible to offer up a justification for change.

Today’s prisons are ostensibly less focused on spiritual transformation, with a perception of greater separation between religion and punishment. Yet, plenty of public and political discourses around the purposes of incarceration are still inflected with religious undertones. Sentiments like “if you do the crime, you do the time” or “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” describe men and women in prisons as dangerous, immoral, or irresponsible.¹⁴ These are not a far cry from centuries-old discourses around sin, contrition, and the need for redemption.

Institutional logic aside, the right to religious practice is among the few constitutional guarantees afforded to incarcerated persons in the United States. That freedom is owed to Black Muslims. In the mid-twentieth century, the Nation of Islam (NOI) proliferated inside American prisons, spreading with intense fervor. It was an affirming force for incarcerated Black men and their lived experiences of white supremacy and oppression. Government and prison administrators, however, viewed it as quite the opposite, fearing NOI as a radicalizing

force that could foment racial upheaval inside correctional facilities. An alarm-sounding report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1960 characterized NOI in prisons as a guise to challenge prison authority rather than a sincerely practiced religious tradition.¹⁵ Prison officials sought to undermine NOI practice by splitting up adherents, placing them in solitary confinement, and denying them access to basic necessities like drinking water and adequate health care. In the years that followed, incarcerated devotees filed myriad grievances, and NOI leadership brought a case to the U.S. Supreme Court, *Cooper v. Pate*, arguing that incarcerated persons could sue state prisons for religious discrimination under the 1871 Civil Rights Act. The Supreme Court ruled in their favor, thereby supporting greater religious protection inside correctional facilities.¹⁶

By the 1990s, federal legislation would take up prison religion amid the rapid rise of Christianity inside prison walls, particularly conservative and evangelical Christianity. In 1993, Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), drafted with help from groups like Charles Colson's politically powerful Prison Fellowship.¹⁷ RFRA mandated that restrictions to religious practice behind bars must be based only on a "compelling government interest," primarily concerning the safety and security of the prison.¹⁸ Four years later, the Supreme Court heard the case *City of Boerne v. Flores* and ruled that RFRA was unconstitutional as applied to states. Reasoning that local ordinances should not be subject to federal regulation, the decision held that state prisons were no longer required to abide by RFRA.

A few years later, legislators once again pushed to protect religious freedom in state prisons. The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) mirrored RFRA's language almost identically, mandating that states accepting federal funds for prison operations should create no burden to restrict the exercise of religion among prisoners unless "in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest" and through the use of the "least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest."¹⁹

RLUIPA passed unanimously in the House of Representatives and the Senate, and was signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 2000.²⁰ Because most states do accept federal funds for the operation of their prisons, RLUIPA applies nearly nationwide.

Religious programs in prison garnered even more support during the George W. Bush administration, with federal funds supporting faith-based initiatives doing the work of social welfare.²¹ As such, just as the federal government slashed state funding for correctional programming, RLUIPA facilitated an unprecedented influx of religious worship services and scriptural studies of all stripes in every jail and prison in the country. The constitutional protection of religious practice, for all incarcerated persons except for those in solitary confinement, combined with budgets strained by the rising forces of mass incarceration and reductions to government spending, created a symbiotic relationship between the state and religion within American prisons. Apart from hiring a full-time chaplain and using staff time to patrol religious programs, prisons incur no additional financial costs for these voluntary programs. Meanwhile, congregations donate holy books and ritual objects, and there is no shortage of volunteers who organize and lead religious gatherings inside prison walls.²² It is clear the state has a number of compelling incentives to embrace these religious programs: they are cost-effective and they provide activities for incarcerated men and women. Thus, while religion's relationship to imprisonment may be less overt compared to centuries ago, it is still very much woven into the fabric of correctional facilities through legislative protection and ubiquitous programming.

What does religious practice look like in contemporary prisons? Again, we see the entanglement of religion and personal transformation—this time, operationally separate from rehabilitative efforts by prison officials. Researchers report on the morally transformative impacts of religious activities like Bible studies and worship services. Studies (primarily on men in prison and primarily on Protestant Christianity in prison) show that religion provides a deeply meaningful sense of hope and moral self-worth,²³ and that

religious participation can have prosocial outcomes for the incarcerated, leading to increased civic engagement, lower measures of aggression, fewer disciplinary infractions, and even a reduced likelihood of recidivism.²⁴ Religion may even help with adjustment to prison by lessening symptoms of depression.²⁵ Certainly, because it is decentralized and reliant on volunteerism, the array of religious programming is wide-ranging and unstandardized. Evidence suggests making religious accommodations across the variety of faith traditions is a persistent challenge,²⁶ and my own research confirms religious minorities must sometimes affiliate with and worship with larger, more active religious groups if their own is underrepresented. That said, a recent study of prevalent prison programs across numerous states found a persistent and shared purpose: personal transformation.²⁷ These findings echo the themes of religious redemption from centuries ago.

Religion also has practical implications for the prison experience. For instance, religion scholar Joshua Dubler draws attention to the prison chapel as a site providing daily routine and structured social interaction to lifers from a variety of faith traditions at Graterford Prison. Furthermore, religion can serve a protective purpose among incarcerated men. Sociologist Andrew Johnson, studying prisons in Rio de Janeiro, shows how adherence to the religiously sanctioned activities of Pentecostalism encouraged incarcerated men to abstain from alcohol, tobacco, and gang involvement.²⁸ Although the research is limited with regard to women's facilities, a handful of studies have demonstrated that religious identities can help women behind bars avoid "the mix" of breaking the rules and getting into trouble with prison officials.²⁹

In some ways, it may come as no surprise that many men and women in prison identify as religious. Outside prison walls, most Americans draw on religion to make sense of their lives. According to a 2014 survey of over 35,000 residents of all 50 states, nine out of 10 Americans say they believe in God. Over 70 percent of Americans identify as Christian, with a quarter of Americans identifying as