The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.

Isaiah 62:1

Introduction

Where can Christians discern the liberating and reconciling work of the Holy Spirit in a land of bondage? We recognize it in the movement for abolition, a movement occasioned by prisons but with a focus and force extending beyond human caging. Abolition contests the grounds for the existence of prisons, not merely by reference to the presence of inequities or disparities in punishment, or to correctional excess (the ‘mass’ in ‘mass incarceration’), but through analyzing how prisons anchor deadly and dehumanizing systems. The framework of abolition runs beyond, and sometimes counter to, the discourse of criminal justice reform which, in US politics, is now widely embraced. Abolition demands an end to killing and caging as responses to harm, and it demands the reconstruction of society through processes of reconciliation and restoration.

While many have been persuaded that our carceral system is a problem, that it over-punishes and exacerbates oppression, the idea of an end to prisons can still sound outlandish. There is no clear path from our current moment to a world without prisons; indeed, there appears to be no path at all. Practical reasoning fails, for the prison has become naturalized, imagined as a necessary part of our world—and it has become essential to the daily operation of state and market. Abolition seems impossible, but ending the moral abomination of human caging also seems imperative. Rather than an impasse, this context provides an opportunity to explore Christian ethics at its best: drawing on distinctive faith commitments to motivate a way of thinking about how to live together that pushes past apparent paradox.

Before presenting ways that Christian ethicists might approach prison abolition, we review the criminal justice reform paradigm that has dominated Christian-ethical reflection on these topics. Critical prison studies scholars in the secular academy have demonstrated the limits of that paradigm and, more importantly, social movements led by those incarcerated have challenged this paradigm. Christian ethicists are thus motivated to approach the prison in a new way, through an abolitionist framework, responsive to state-of-the-art scholarship and the insights of those at society’s margins.

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After presenting such a framework and arguing for its compatibility with Christian ethical traditions, we consider and respond to several objections to abolitionism. Along the way, we argue that it is necessary to move from a Christocentric ethical response to one that takes pneumatology seriously—when analyzing prisons but also, when prisons are treated as an exemplary case for Christian ethical analysis.

The Limits of Reform

The prison as a problem was barely on the radar screen of Christian ethics—academic, pastoral, or popular—until the second decade of the twenty-first century (though the prison was an object of concern to Christian ethicists in Europe and the US during the 1960s and 1970s; see DeWolf 1975; Ruggiero 2010). In broader public discourse in the US, during the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, the prison was most often framed as a solution to social problems, rarely as a social problem itself. The publication of Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* marked a turning point in public discourse. Alexander challenged commonly held notions of a causal link between ‘criminal behavior’ and the growth of imprisonment by framing the carceral buildup as “a stunningly comprehensive and well-designed system of racialized social control” (Alexander 2010, p. 4). Drawing upon her experience as a civil rights lawyer, Alexander’s work narrates the continued renewal of a racialized underclass from slavery, tracing the ideologies and practices of the carceral state as part of a lineage including slavery, lynching, and segregation, with particular attention to the impact of the War on Drugs. This narrative arc catalyzed conversations in classrooms, church discussion groups, and prisons around the country, challenging common sense notions correlating crime and punishment, framing mass incarceration as a problem, and opening the possibility that incarceration could be symptomatic of a broader moral and spiritual crisis. However, much of the public discourse in the US about ending mass incarceration has focused on policy fixes, exemplified by groups like the Interfaith Criminal Justice Coalition which have gathered religious communities to lobby for reforms in Washington. Recent scholarship in Christian ethics narrates the moral crises of the prison through a framework intended to rehabilitate the institution (see Bacote and Perrin 2019; Skotnicki 2019). With scholars making compelling arguments that the rise of the prison is connected with deeply-rooted anti-Black racism, capitalism, dysfunctional democracy, and American imperialism, adopting a criminal justice reform framework that focuses on discrete policy fixes prevents the prison problem from appearing so overwhelming as to be paralyzing.

Critical prison studies scholars, including historians, sociologists, and cultural studies scholars, have argued that the exponential growth of the US prison system since the 1970s actually results, in part, from the transfiguration and domestication of claims to justice. Naomi Murakawa (2014) argues that it was not only or especially political conservatives, in the US, who championed prison growth. She indicts what she names an ethos of “liberal law and order,” tracing the beginnings of the national carceral apparatus to the response of political leaders to pleas from civil rights activists for safety and relief from mob violence, as the goals of regulating, professionalizing, and strengthening federal law enforcement eclipsed broader visions of structural transformation. Elizabeth Hinton (2016) has likewise chronicled how Great Society legislation created a new national law enforcement infrastructure designed to exist alongside robust social welfare programs, but the latter proved more susceptible to austerity measures. James
Forman (2017) describes a parallel dynamic at work among Black political leaders at various levels of government, who joined the law and order consensus for its promises of community and safety, with devastating effects (see also Fortner 2015). In other words, the process of translating broad, often morally or spiritually rooted claims to justice into policy prescriptions may make the prison problem worse rather than better (Schenwar and Law 2020). Note also that framing mass incarceration as the “New Jim Crow” invites a reform framework in a way that linking prisons to slavery does not: the US civil rights movement is remembered as advocating changes in the law whereas the end of slavery required a dramatic, violent reordering of society economically, racially, and politically.

Not only have scholars raised concerns about the limits of a criminal justice reform framework, so too have incarcerated and formerly incarcerated organizers. Consider the “call to end slavery in America” issued in 2016 by such organizers on the 45th anniversary of the Attica uprising, leading to what may have been the largest protest by incarcerated people in the history of the US:

Our protest against prison slavery is a protest against the school to prison pipeline, a protest against police terror, a protest against post-release controls. When we abolish slavery, they’ll lose much of their incentive to lock up our children, they’ll stop building traps to pull back those who they’ve released. When we remove the economic motive and grease of our forced labor from the US prison system, the entire structure of courts and police, of control and slave-catching must shift to accommodate us as humans, rather than slaves.

(Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee 2016)

At the heart of abolitionist organizing is an ongoing analysis of the social relations in which the prison system functions, combining structural analysis of political and economic conditions with attention to the experiences of those most impacted by incarceration. Prisons are not an isolated issue but a primary site of violence in the midst of a complex web. Punctuating and fueling this analysis is a claim to human dignity, a claim that caging humans violates our inherent worth.

Abolitionist organizers claim that the proper response is double-sided: demanding an end to practices and ideologies of domination and, at the same time, creating new pathways for mutual aid and solidarity. Abolitionist collectives such as Critical Resistance, Project NIA, and Black and Pink embody diverse methods of dually understanding and challenging prisons by surveying the immanent political and economic necessities which cause them to entrench and expand, while also organizing and educating people and communities most susceptible to their violence. Linking the critical and constructive sides of abolition organizing is restorative justice: a set of practices for addressing harm that demonstrate the power of communities to heal broken relationships at the local level, without state intervention, and that implicitly or explicitly encourage suspicion of the criminal justice system. By making space for those who have been harmed to speak about what they experienced surrounded by loved ones, together with the person who caused harm and their loved ones, a community can realize its capacity to move toward wholeness without state intervention. Connecting the personal and the political, individuals can witness the damage done by racism, economic exploitation, and state violence on their communities, on themselves, and on those who have harmed them—or at least this is the aspiration of abolitionist-led restorative justice practices (but see Dubler and Lloyd [2019] on the ambivalence of restorative justice).
There is not yet much dialogue between Christian ethicists and the scholarly and grassroots critics who have moved beyond a criminal justice reform paradigm, toward abolitionism. It is understandable that contemporary abolitionist organizers may be hesitant to draw upon Christian tradition in a push to dismantle prisons, given the crucial role of Christian ideology and practice in the building of the penitentiary system and in various justifications for its growth and preservation. Yet from its nineteenth-century beginnings in opposition to slavery to its confrontations with anti-Black racism during Reconstruction and Jim Crow, abolitionism in the US has also been shaped by religious commitments and rhetoric. Anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett cites a Christian minister crying out, “In the name of God, I command you to cease this torture!” (1895, chapter 3). Here we see the same intuition voiced by the prison strike organizers in 2016: when Christians encounter a moral abomination, when we see the image of God in the human being defaced, we intervene immediately (Lloyd 2019). The harmful practice must cease, and right relationships between community members must be restored—not gradually, not tomorrow, but today. Abolitionist organizers embrace the need for immediate action, even if it seems impossible: a movement of faith. Do Christian ethical traditions hold resources that could complement this instinct?

Reasoning with Christian Tradition

Christian ethical reflection on the prison follows naturally—and necessarily—from the long trajectory of penal development engineered by Christianity itself. In his sociological analysis of modern punishment, David Garland highlights penal techniques developed by the medieval Roman Catholic Church, including both imprisonment by ecclesiastical courts as well as cellular confinement and penitential discipline carried out by monastic orders (Garland 1993, pp. 203–204). In his study of the penitentiary in England from 1750–1850, Michael Ignatieff examines religious penal reformers, particularly the Evangelicals, Methodists, and Quakers (Ignatieff 1978). Christian influence on American penal development has been particularly significant. The two prototypical American penitentiaries—Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania and Auburn Penitentiary in New York—implemented penal systems that reflected Quaker and Presbyterian/Calvinist theology, respectively. In her study of antebellum America, Jennifer Graber observes that Quakers initially imagined the prison as a garden of rehabilitation, but Calvinist reformers “turned to the prophet Isaiah and spoke of the prison as a furnace of affliction in which God-ordained sufferings paved the way for receiving grace and reforming behavior.” As time went on, Graber shows how religious reformers “insisted that retribution and degradation had no place in the furnace of affliction... [but] they did not win the debate” (Graber 2011, p. 6).

Isn’t punishment a well-established part of the Christian tradition, not only in the early days of the prison but from the Hebrew Bible to the threat of damnation to practices of penance? Beyond the Christian tradition, isn’t punishment part of the human condition: when I act wrongly, I face consequences? There is certainly a sense in Western culture that doing justice involves getting even: someone who caused violence is properly subject to violence in response. Is this aspect of culture aligned with Christian ethical principles? One of the contributions of scholarly discourse on Christian ethics, particularly over the past few decades, is to place moral formation at the center of Christian life. While it may be the case that the logic of punishment can be found in Christian scripture and tradition, so can the logic of moral formation: cultivating the
virtues in community through education, emulation, and discernment. Indeed, some may argue that examples of punishment are in the service of moral formation, serving a pedagogical function in particular contexts rather than authorizing a timeless, legalistic system of punishment. Independent of considerations specific to Christian ethics, it is an open question about human psychology whether threat of punishment or desire for reward—the pleasures of flourishing life—are more effective at motivating human behavior.

Even if one concluded that punishment (or penance) has a place in Christian ethics, is the prison the sort of institution that could punish well? If such a thing as good punishment exists, it would build up rather than break down the human person. The prison, in contrast, severs human relationships, degrades those incarcerated (and stokes the *libido dominandi* of those charged with staffing prisons), and subjects those incarcerated to vulnerability to violence, especially sexual violence. Even for those who believe punishment is a necessary part of childrearing, a punishment that resulted in children facing such conditions would clearly be out of bounds. Further, there is little evidence that the prison is an effective means of punishment. If the purpose of punishment is to discourage those who transgress from transgressing again, why do so many people incarcerated end up again caught up in the criminal justice system after their release? The instrument of punishment would seem to misfit its purpose, but even more than that, the agent who punishes seems inappropriate. At its best, punishment is a delicate and individual matter. The state, captured by its own inertia and interests, inattentive to local cultures and individual psychologies and histories, will inevitably get punishment wrong.

A further concern for Christian ethics is the relationship between punishment and justice. If justice is fundamentally understood as retribution and restoring moral order, then punishment and a carceral state seem powerful tools for realizing God’s will. Timothy Gorringe shows that penal theory and atonement theory “reacted upon each other” and led to the validation of violence in the service of justice. As the criminal law became identified as an instrument of God’s justice, there arose a certain mysticism of pain, offering redemption to those who paid in suffering and in blood (Gorringe 1996, pp. 22, 102). Yet scholars continue to argue that a broader, restorative understanding of justice is a more faithful rendering of biblical justice. Justice describes the saving intervention of God that seeks to restore creation to God’s original purposes. An exclusively retributive justice, narrowly focused on punishment and the crucifixion, distracts from the justice accomplished in resurrection through the restoring, life-giving Spirit of God.

In short, there are moments in Christian history and the Christian moral tradition that can be seen as offering legitimacy to the prison, but the story is more complex. Despite the ways that Christianity has served as innovator and apologist for the prison, its moral-theological tradition also offers ample reasons to abolish the institution. We briefly highlight four such reasons here.

1. The prison functions through marginalization. Despite the fact that the common good has long been used as a theological justification for punishment in the name of community protection, valuing the common good is in fact an argument for prison abolition. Particularly as the concept has been developed in the tradition of Catholic social thought, the common good cannot abide the disposal of any member since human flourishing relies on relationality and participation. As a result, marginalization is understood as a grave threat to both the individual person and the
community at large. As Kathryn Getek Soltis and Katie Walker Grimes have noted (2021, p. 112), the prison presents itself as a rational exception, suggesting that marginalization can be beneficial and necessary. However, the “myth of permissible marginalization” (Soltis 2019) is untenable. By its very constitution, the common good permits no such exceptions. The exclusion of any individual is fundamentally an attack on the community. To regard such exclusion as an act of community protection violates the essential logic of the common good. To be clear, the prison does not merely contribute to preexisting marginalization engineered by racial, economic, and other social inequities. The prison also explicitly functions through marginalization by excluding individuals from society as a form of punishment. The common good and its highly relational theological anthropology stand in protest, therefore, of the very essence of the penal enterprise.

2 The prison is institutionalized hopelessness. While narratives of conversion and redemption seem to legitimize the carceral state, such narratives typically arise in spite of penal structures, not as their outcomes. This is because, among its failures, the prison exists in opposition to Christian hope. Drawing from Jürgen Moltmann’s work, we argue three aspects of hope are particularly relevant. First, hope requires a context of freedom since an “action sustained by hope is a free action, not one under compulsion” (Moltmann 2012, p. 3). Indeed, Moltmann characterizes hope as neither capitulating to the powers of the world nor to one’s own helplessness. Yet, the prison is made possible by stripping individuals of power and requiring deference to authorities. Second, hope transcends mere survival: “Anxiety is concerned for our lives—hope, for our fulfilled lives” (Moltmann 2012, p. 4). Given the skills needed simply to endure incarceration, the prison consistently deflects attention from questions of human fulfillment. Third, Christian hope is founded on resurrection and God’s new world. Thus, “looking forward, perceiving possibilities and anticipating what will be tomorrow are fundamental concepts of an ethics of hope” (Moltmann 2012, p. 8). In contrast and by design, the prison looks backward on a punishable offense and terminates possibilities as the deliberate response. Instead of being anticipated, “tomorrow” is made both irrelevant and precarious. None of this is to suggest that the prison is able to effectively stamp out the theological virtue of hope in incarcerated persons. However, as an institution, the prison is indeed constructed in opposition to the fundamentals of Christian hope.

3 The prison is violence. Certainly, there is no consensus in Christianity with regard to the moral status of violence. Even so, the tradition of Christian nonviolence is a robust one, grounded in the example of Jesus and his call to love one’s enemies. Christian nonviolence actively resists dehumanization, prioritizing reconciliation, mutuality, and the conditions that would address root causes of violence. There is no question that prisons are places of violence. Ample studies reveal the appalling levels of physical and sexual violence, to say nothing of the abuses that are even less visible in nature. Yet, this can easily become a rallying cry for prison reform rather than abolition. The critical question for Christian ethics is whether the prison itself is a form of violence. Even with drastically improved conditions of incarceration, the confined person is placed under total control of others, and a radical imbalance of power renders dehumanization nearly inevitable. Most significantly, the prison forcibly removes persons from their familial and social relationships, and in many cases completely severs these bonds. This constitutes the fundamental violence of the prison. It is a violence that cannot be resolved with even the most
well-intentioned reforms. The tradition of Christian nonviolence cannot abide an institution that manufactures “enemies” by reducing their social status to offender and cutting them off from family and society alike.

4 The prison is a culminating social injustice. The inequities that characterize a society will be revealed through the persons that the society incarcerates. The very communities that have been particularly injured by racism, poverty, unemployment, inadequate health care, poor educational systems, and environmental degradation will also be injured by the imprisonment of its members. The relationship is bidirectional, however. As Amy Levad makes clear, the crisis of criminal justice both reflects and sustains a broader crisis of social justice (Levad 2014). Prison therefore represents the abject failure of the love of neighbor. Indeed, grounded in a Christian vision of radical human bondedness, James Samuel Logan turns to the “politics of ontological intimacy” to find alternatives to contemporary practices of imprisonment (Logan 2008, pp. 13, 201–254). In the meantime, countless individuals who have already been abandoned by society are further demonized when they find their way to prison, cementing their social vulnerability and, it would appear, exonerating society of its role in facilitating harm. The prison thus stands in stark contrast to Christianity’s special concern for the poor and marginalized as well as its desire to confront complicity in human suffering. The prison looms as an ever-present threat to the vulnerable and as a primary obstruction to social justice.

While the Christian argument for prison abolition points to theological anthropology and social ethics, it also reveals the crucial place of pneumatology. A Christocentric reading of the tradition largely finds guidance for penal practices in the concept of Jesus as prisoner. A central text is the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:

‘And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’.

(Mt 25:39–40)

This call to recognize Christ in the imprisoned offers a basis for Christian penal reform efforts. It mandates humane living conditions. It highlights the need for relationship and visitation. It challenges the prevailing stigma assigned to incarcerated persons. Yet despite its merits, a Christocentric approach alone does not support a compelling argument for abolition. While the image of an imprisoned Christ helps reveal the scandal of contemporary prisons, it does not necessarily question the institution of captivity itself. Pneumatology (or a pneumatological Christology) is needed. Instead of Matthew 25, the central text is Isaiah 61, later proclaimed by Jesus in the synagogue: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to . . . proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (Is 61:1, cf. Lk 4:18). The Spirit mediates God’s liberatory work unfolding in and through history. While the modern prison has no equivalent in the historical moment of Jesus, it still poses a stinging question for the contemporary, spirit-filled proclamation of the Good News. The promises of liberty and release do not guide penal reforms; rather, they call for abolition. Indeed, Lee Griffith locates the announcement of the fall of the prison in this proclamation of liberty for the captives. Griffith states, “To proclaim that the prison has fallen is not to pretend that God’s will is fully incarnate in the world; rather, it is to witness to the
presence of God’s kingdom and to allow that presence to demythologize us” (Griffith 1993, p. 204).

Ultimately, the Christian argument for abolition is anchored in the vision of the Kingdom of God. It is a vision from which no one is excluded and all violence ceases, a vision in which hope is fulfilled and justice is fully realized. The Spirit makes it possible to shape human moral action around this vision even while we remain under the power of sin and death. In this way, pneumatology animates an abolitionist stance and reveals the ultimate compatibility of God’s justice and mercy.

**Concerns and Responses**

The criminal justice system in the US and similar systems around the world may not—and should not—implement a moral order, or a Christian moral order. Nonetheless, they offer a baseline for social order that serves as the condition of possibility for ethical life and human flourishing. For that baseline to be in place, isn’t it necessary to separate those who would cause grave harms, and license others to cause harms, from the rest of society?

Supposing that there is a certain group of people who do or would cause grave harms runs against a basic tenet of Christian theological anthropology. We each harm others. Indeed, we each are capable of inflicting and suffering grave harms. Grappling with this aspect of our nature is an essential part of understanding who we are, and an essential part of our relationship with God. It is tempting to conceal from ourselves the harms we commit, and the further harms we may commit in the future. One technique to conceal this truth is to separate humans into those with serious moral flaws (in need of separation, incarceration) from the rest of us. Doing so distorts our image of ourselves and our relationship with God. Another technique to conceal the harms we commit is to reduce harms to individual acts, separating them from their broader social and psychological context. Focusing on heinous acts in isolation makes it possible for us to assure ourselves that we are not the sort of people who would ever engage in such behavior. Further, a focus on harmful acts as the paradigm of moral wrongs distracts our attention from cultures and systems in which we participate that cause very concrete, bodily harm: the displacement, disease, and death caused by fossil fuels we use without a second thought, the widespread sexual violence authorized by patriarchal cultures, the economic deprivation and bodily injury suffered by workers at the giant corporations whose products we buy, and so on.

Despite acknowledgments of the shared condition of human sin, Christian ethicists and ecclesial leaders often grant a special status to those deemed innocent. The distinction is particularly egregious when it comes to language around the sanctity of human life. For example, Pope John Paul II’s encyclical on the Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae) repeatedly refers to the inviolable right of every innocent being to life. The implication is that sanctity (and perhaps human dignity) is conditional. Though emphasizing constraints on the taking of life, the encyclical does permit killing in instances of self-defense and for punishment. When arguing for respect for every life, “even that of criminals and unjust aggressors” (Evangelium Vitae 1995, no. 57), the encyclical betrays its bias. As a result, it is so-called innocence, more than humanity, that is the category for protection. Despite access to the theological resources (e.g., imago dei) to resist discrimination and subordination, the Christian moral tradition has still not committed its full protection to those deemed guilty by legal authorities. In doing so, Christian ethics conflates and confuses theological language around righteousness with social narratives that exclude and demonize.
the embrace of prison abolition, Christianity returns itself to the expansive affirmation of life consistent with the proclamation of liberation, thereby witnessing to a Gospel that can be received as truly good news by all God’s people.

There may, indeed, be individuals whose behavior is enormously destructive to the well-being of others, outside the normal range of harms that we are all capable of causing. But such individuals, by definition, have a psychological problem and need psychological care. We should, however, remember the role of the asylum as a warehouse for social “undesirables” that preceded the prison (Harcourt 2012). The US does not have much practice providing psychological care in small-scale settings, accountable to local communities, but this is where we ought to be investing resources.

What, then, is necessary to maintain a social order that could allow for ethical life and human flourishing? Such an order is possible when the basic needs of all are met: when each individual has access to food, shelter, health care, friends and family, and rewarding activities. When only the basic needs of some people in a society are met, it is a recipe for disorder. The effect of the prison is not only to deprive those incarcerated of their basic needs, including adequate health care, social relationships, and rewarding activities, but to prevent their loved ones from having their basic needs met as well, socially but also, often, economically. In other words, in its purported attempt to preserve the social order, the prison does just the opposite, promoting disorder and blocking the possibility of ethical life and human flourishing.

The prison system in the US may have problems, perhaps severe problems. So may the courts and the police. But when social institutions are not functioning properly, and causing harm, isn’t our obligation to improve them? Aren’t there models of other countries—say, in Scandinavia—where the prison systems (and courts, and police) operate humanely?

Well-meaning reformers were among the creators of the US prison system. Compared to corporal punishment, the prison seemed humane. A long series of reformers, often motivated by perceived Christian-ethical imperatives, have sought to improve prison conditions—with grim results. Solitary confinement was supposed to give those incarcerated the chance to reflect on their misdeeds and make right with their God but actually breaks down the human spirit. Unpaid prison labor was supposed to teach those incarcerated life skills but actually exploits and strips dignity from labor. Variable sentences were supposed to allow punishments to be tailored to individual circumstances and personal transformation but actually led to pervasive abuses of power. Then, the reform of determinate-length sentences actually led to a continual ratcheting-up of sentence length, creating sentences grossly mismatching with offenses. Today, some reformers seek technological fixes to the prison problem, turning to home detention and monitoring, yet these supposed fixes often lead to similar effects as the prison, severing individuals from relationships with family, friends, and rewarding activity—and in the process enriching the corporations hawking new technologies.

The prison populations in Europe certainly are an order of magnitude lower than the prison population in the US. Sentences are shorter, and conditions are less degrading. And yet: studies show prison populations in Europe are disproportionately composed of racial minorities, immigrants, and poor people, just like the US (Wacquant 2009). Prisons take those who are already marginalized in a society and worsen their conditions, disrupting family and community life, removing economic opportunities during and after incarceration, and inflicting physical, sexual, and psychological harm. Whether the scale of this harm is monumental, as in the US, or just severe, as in Europe, the fundamental dynamic at work remains the same.
If the goal of prison abolition is realized and everyone incarcerated is released today, won’t the world be a very dangerous place tomorrow?

In the mid-nineteenth century, many US politicians and members of the public worried about what would happen after the end of slavery. Wouldn’t there be marauding bands of former slaves wreaking havoc? Wouldn’t some former slaves suffer and die, lacking skills to work or knowledge of how to take care of themselves? Among those who believed slavery to run against Christian ethics, many believed that the US had an obligation to carefully manage the unwinding of the slave system so as to preserve social order and create the conditions for those enslaved to flourish after the end of their bondage. Slaves just aren’t ready to be free today, they charged. In retrospect, these arguments sound not only wrong but embarrassingly so. With slavery now classed as a moral abomination, there could be no justification for continuing the system for one more day, let alone unwinding it over a period of years.

If everyone incarcerated today is released, will they have an easy time tomorrow? No. There will certainly be serious problems. But when we encounter a moral abomination, when the image of God in the human is being defaced, when human beings are kept in cages, immediate action is essential. Will the world be more dangerous? Not necessarily for those who are currently incarcerated, facing the daily risk of violence from guards and from others incarcerated, and continually enduring spiritual violence. For those now living outside prisons? The question implies that danger resides in specific humans that might cause harm. But it is more accurate to locate danger in distorted relationships. Those relationships entail harm and precipitate acts of violence. Reducing danger means re-ordering relationships, rightly ordering relationships. The prison today has a powerful disordering effect on relationships from a small scale, involving those incarcerated, to a large scale, through the scapegoating of “criminals” and the self-conception of others as “innocents,” and through the forms of economic, racial, and gender exploitation that are connected to and exacerbated by the prison system. The prison causes danger; eliminating the prison will not eliminate all danger, but it also will not introduce danger into a world of safety. Indeed, this is precisely the logic that makes the prison seem necessary: danger is localized onto the bodies of those incarcerated, making it so that we are unable to appreciate the dangers all around us—and unable to exercise the judgment necessary to navigate those dangers, to navigate the fallen world.

Finally, an important strand of Christian ethics is suspicious of solutions to social problems emanating from the state (including the prison) and instead has faith in the ability of community, at the local level, to develop innovative and effective solutions to the problems they face. Those who are subject to domination become experts in survival, creatively engaging with the resources at hand to make a livable life, or even to flourish. Instead of planning out what state policies must be in place before prison abolition is possible, why not affirm our faith in those incarcerated and the families and friends who love them to build new, unexpected forms of community from which we can all learn?

Suppose prisons are abolished. Given the sinful nature of human beings, and the corrupted nature of human institutions, won’t some new institution that is even worse than the prison replace them?

One of the great insights of Christian ethics, as opposed to secular ethics, is the former’s appreciation for the inevitable presence of sin in the world. Human beings cause harm and are harmed: this is the sort of creature we are. Human institutions, even
those created with the best intentions and careful planning, diverge from their purposes and cause harm. There was a time before the prison and there will be a time after the prison. The character of human nature and institutions will remain the same. There will be other institutions that are intended to ensure social order, to keep communities safe, or to heal, and they will cause grave harm. Yet the imperative to seek justice and peace remains. On another time horizon, divine rather than human, it is certain that domination will come to an end, and this motivates struggle against domination in our fallen world. Our work will not be done after the prison falls, but our work today is to pull down the prison walls.

It is true that focusing on prison abolition alone would be counterproductive. The explosive growth of the prison in the US occurred at the tail end of racial segregation, and scholars have convincingly argued that a driving force in prison expansion was the desire to preserve white supremacy (Weaver 2007). If the prison ends but white supremacy persists, some new, cruel institution could very well assume the racist function of the prison. The same could be said for an economic system that allows for the exploitation of prison labor, and for the existence of private prisons. And it could also be said for a political system that purports to be democratic but actually privileges the interests of wealthy men. If these systems persist, the end of the prison will be followed closely by the invention of institutions just as bad, or worse. Christian ethicists addressing criminal justice issues must not separate their analysis of prisons from analysis of racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and pseudo-democracy.

How can Christian ethicists challenge the prison and support the growth of alternative forums for addressing harm when the task seems both insurmountable and futile? Here again we can draw inspiration from the movement to end slavery. There were certainly moral and theological intuitions animating that movement, about slavery as a moral abomination, but the ethical substance, so to speak, was in movement. The practices of collective organizing against slavery sharpened ethical judgment, drew on past traditions and exempla, and imagined new futures. Such a focus on the priority of movement to principles and reasoning is also an embrace of the Spirit working in the world. This is what the abomination of the prison calls for today: turning to the moral authority implicit in the practice of organizing against the prison, led by those most affected by the prison, collectively imagining a world without prisons.

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