

Whalen Symposium 2019

The effectiveness of chaplaincy in the American prison system in regards to race by Aryanna Myles

Since the foundation of the U.S. prison system, religion and prison have been deeply entwined together to create a sense of rehabilitation for inmates to become better people. The first prison made in the United States was in 1750 by the Pennsylvanian Quakers. They were the first to practice and popularize the use of religious rehabilitation on criminals. This was found in through the use of prison chaplains and other forms of religious practice such as having prisoners read scriptures from the Bible and having them repent their “sins” (crimes). While this form of rehabilitation has been cost-effective for prisons then and now, the American prison system today has since turned into a place of survival rather than as a nurturing place for prisoners to right their wrongs.

The use of religion as a form of rehabilitation especially through the use of prison chaplaincy today has since been renounced as illogical by modern day activists and scholars alike because of the racial and religious differences between the chaplain and inmate populations. The chaplains found in prison are mostly white and evangelical while the inmate population is mostly black and brown/ Hispanic and mostly non-Evangelical. This racial and religious discrepancies found between these two populations therefore creates an invisible barrier that affected how prisons can be used as places of rehabilitation and the mental and physical health of the inmates.

My presentation tries to answer two questions:

- * Is there any point of having religion or chaplaincy in prison if you are a long-term or life tem inmate?
- * Does the racial and religious makeup of these prison chaplains in the U.S. make it more helpful or more damaging to the inmates?

The first question deals with the hypocrisy I believe is found in the American prison system. I believe that even though religion can be considered the most cost effective way to rehabilitate a prisoner for reentry into society, this practice can only work on short term, non-violent prisoners. Prison has never been a nurturing place. Instead, it is a place of constant trauma and survival. For prisoners who are serving long term or life term sentences with little chance of parole, the effects of prison chaplaincy could be considered minimal and the only thing they may get out of using this type of resource is to indulge in small pleasures that are rare amongst them.

My second question in turn expands on the first one because even though I believe the effectiveness of prison chaplaincy is hypocritical, it also creates commentary on the biases found in both structures-religion and prison (as an institution). The racial makeup of chaplains-predominately white- does not reflect the brown and black majority that is grossly found in our country’s prison population. This could affect how religion is enacted on the prisoners because of the racial divide, ex: white chaplains spiritually controlling how inmates should act and of the institutional racism that is already in play ex: drug laws, school-to prison pipeline. Therefore in my eyes, prison chaplaincy negatively effects this is just another example of how oppression through structures comes into play.

Whether the prison sentence is a short term, long term or life sentence, living in confined spaces has greatly affected the psyche and physicality of inmates across this country. For example, racism has seeped into the prison system through the demographics of the inmate population- with more black and hispanic people being held behind bars rather than their white counterparts for minor crimes and longer term sentences. Therefore, when an inmate this population is looking for a positive outlook on life inside their prison walls, most would try to turn to religion however this structure that they once looked to before they were sentenced might actually increased their risk of harm and healing in the prison system.

With the use of the Pew Research Center's "Religion in prison: A 50 state survey of prison chaplains" and other testimonials made both by chaplains and prisoners, I hope that my presentation will answer these questions as well as make the audience learn more about the history of the prison system in the United States.