

New York Theological

Sing Sing Correctional Facility

Our Context

We are seventeen theology students currently in exile within the bowels of a New York state prison. Mostly from the five boroughs of New York City, we are from various ethnic groups, mainly black and Latino. Our faith traditions are primarily Christianity and Islam. We are believers striving to live out our faith in all that we say and do each day. We were transferred to Sing Sing Correctional Facility to study as a group toward a master's degree in professional studies.

There are seventy prisons in New York state and approximately 70,000 prisoners.

According to the New York State Department of Correctional Services figures for 1995, the New York state prison population is made up of 85 percent blacks and Latinos, with 75 percent coming from the inner-city areas of New York City. Upon release 98 percent of us will return to our neighborhoods.

It is clear that black and Latino communities are most impacted by the policies of the criminal justice system. Yet our communities have the least to say about what goes on in prison. Those establishing and enforcing criminal justice policies are seldom from our urban communities, and their policies are out of step with the needs of blacks and Latinos.

The policymakers are commonly vociferous and consistently diligent with regard to their "tough on crime" stance. But they are eerily silent when it comes to the issues of poverty, education, housing, and health care for the marginalized.

Correctional facilities have become big businesses. With 98 percent of state prisons located in rural Republican districts, the prison-industrial complex reflects the interests of those communities. It costs taxpayers approximately \$30,000 a year to incarcerate a prisoner; by contrast it costs \$11,215 to send an undergraduate to the State University of New York for a year.¹ Astonishingly, it costs \$100,000 to build a single prison cell, more than the average college seat in our country, yet lawmakers would rather incarcerate than educate. The crime rate has actually declined, but they continue to build more prisons. As the educational system in our communities continues to deteriorate, prison construction escalates. The high school dropout rate is alarmingly high in our communities, yet educational budgets are slashed and remedial education is eliminated. There are cases of tenured college professors leaving their educational posts to become correctional officers

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because of the attractive salaries, job security, and insurance benefits.

We are prepared to make the best of our time and the necessary adjustments for a successful reentry into society, but facing the parole board is like returning to court and having the judge sentence you again for the same crime. There is a double standard of justice and a double jeopardy in judgment.

There is a public outcry against the parole system. To listen only to government officials one would conclude that most of the crimes committed in New York City are committed by individuals on parole. However, 1995 statistics compiled by the New York Police Department indicate that only 4.5 percent of crimes were committed by parolees.

Many of the churches and other faith communities in the black and Latino neighborhoods from which we have come have abandoned us. The silence of black and Latino Christian, Jewish, and Islamic congregations in urban communities makes them unwitting accomplices to the plight of prisoners.

We feel trapped and cut off by a system that seems to have no capacity for love or compassion and refuses to recognize that people can change. Increasingly, politicians

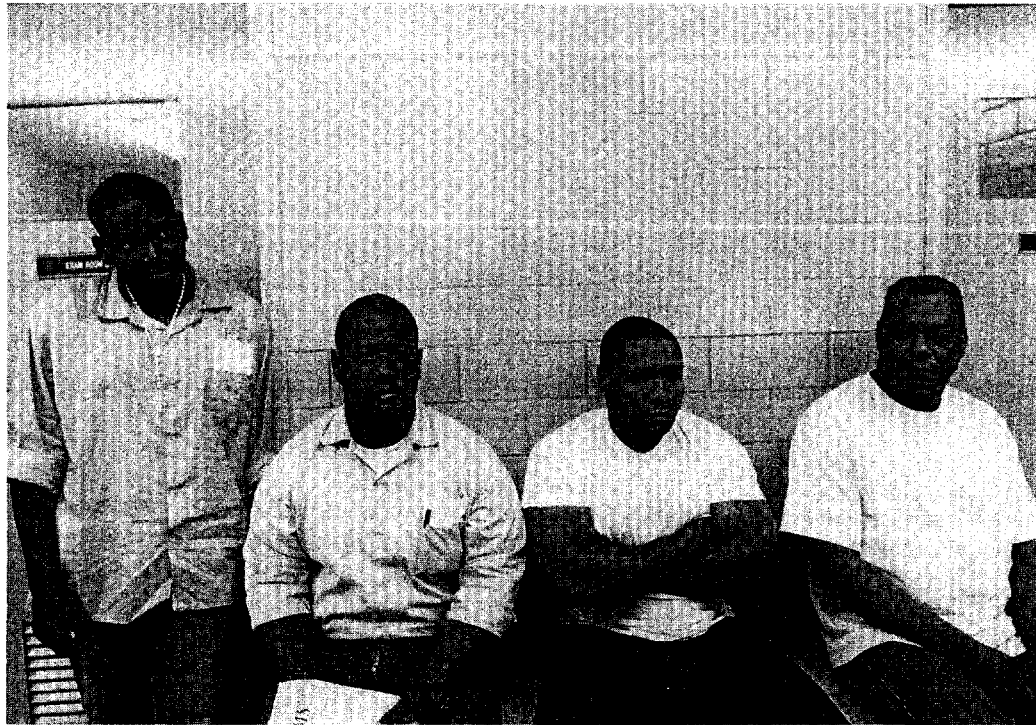
and the media manipulate public sentiment toward vengefulness instead of redemption, and that makes the public slow to understand the social causes of wrong behavior. Prison: easy to get in and difficult to get out—even when you are eligible for parole. Prison is a branding method tantamount to modern slavery; it totally rejects any possibility of rehabilitation.

Our Faith Reflection

Ours is a society that has grown increasingly unforgiving, disregarding the possibility of transformation and self-renewal of prisoners. But our faith tells us that we all are redeemable, that no matter how low we fall, we can rise again. Who can make judgments that anyone is beyond redemption?

If Allah were to punish men for their wrongdoing, He would not leave on the earth a single living creature. (Qur'an 16:61)

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and



Camaraderie. Photo by Philippe Cheng

strengthens the powerless. . . . Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:28-31)

As a consequence of our spiritual and mental transformation, we are remorseful about our crimes and the pain we have caused others. Yes, we have done wrong, and we apologize, but we need to be given a chance to make amends.

We are redeemed and we have turned our lives over to God. Our faith and practice afford us the opportunity to give back to our communities. Our commitment to change has been facilitated through the process of critical education, which has mobilized us toward liberation, redemption, empowerment, and transformation.

This past year has been a life-transforming experience for us. Jeremiah 29:7 tells us to seek the shalom of the city of our exile, the welfare of the place in which we find ourselves. For us now, that place is prison and we are doing our best to enhance not only our own lives, but the lives of others as well.

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. (Galatians 6:9)

Our Future with Our Communities

We ask for the chance to show that we are not the same men who made the decisions that put us in prison. Don't simply take our word for it. Give us the chance to demonstrate our

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transformation—and there are very specific ways that we can do so.

For example, there are virtually no primary intervention mechanisms in place for inner-city youths. Youths are left to fend for themselves and severely punished when they make wrong choices. We are qualified and eager to assist our youth. Most of us began our wayward and destructive paths as adolescents. Now our skills and concerns enable us to be highly effective in helping youths. New York Theological Seminary Master's in Professional Studies (NYTS/MPS) alumni who have been released from prison have demonstrated success in this area. Most are employed in human services, and they have the lowest recidivism rate in the state. Our children and communities need us, and we stand ready to make a lifelong atonement to our communities. We ask only the chance.

Allah does not change the condition of a folk until they first change that which is in their hearts. (Qur'an 13:11)

We also want to speak to the people in our neighborhoods, especially to communities of faith, for the state of affairs within the black and Latino communities will never be corrected by those outside our communities.

The question is how do the people from our communities want prisoners to return to their communities? People in our communities who understand our experiences should be involved in the rehabilitative and transitional process of prisoners, to help us become an asset to our communities upon our return. Who benefits when uneducated men and women are released from prison? Only the

prison-industrial complex, which is assured of high rates of recidivism. The criminal justice system not only exploits us, the prisoners, but it equally exploits taxpayers. It is essential that we bridge the gap that alienates us from each other.

There should be a consistent interaction between prisoners and our faith communities: "I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:36). Such a relationship over time helps us grow spiritually and be part of a life-transforming process. There are some programs already in

place and we invite all who read this to participate. (If you would like to help, please contact NYTS or the prison facility nearest you.)

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. (Hebrews 13:3)

Faith groups should be advocates for both interfaith and interdenominational activities in our communities, serving as "repairers of the breaches" (Isaiah 58:12) that keep us divided; interfaith collaboration, between Christians and Muslims, has worked within our group in prison, and it can work in our communities. A message needs to be sent to those in power to stop penalizing every prisoner for the criminal acts of a few parolees. We should be judged by what we have done to change our own lives and should be held accountable for our own actions, not somebody else's.

As a measure to deter crime and to keep urban youth out of prison, adequate and effective education should be the focal point for government, churches, and recreation centers. Education builds a sound and safe soci-

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ety, whereas illiteracy contributes to the destruction of humanity, perpetuating the poverty that too easily leads to prison. We know firsthand the benefits of education and pledge ourselves to share those benefits both in prison and when we return to our communities.

We ask in the Spirit of Righteousness and the One, True, and Living God that you take this document to heart, remembering always to consider the good that is inherent in all of creation and the struggle of the despised and imprisoned throughout our nation. Let us "believe and do good works, and exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to endurance" (Qur'an 103:3). Seek God's Spirit and Righteousness with us in every endeavor. In the words of Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

*Ja'Far Abbas
Najee P. Angus*

James Baggett (Muhamm-ed)

Joseph Benbow

Woodrow Collins, Jr.

Anthony Culpepper

George (Leo) Diaz

Fermin Flores (Mateen)

Patrick Flynn

Melvin Isaac

Lennard P. Joyner

Michael J. Love

Angel Rivera (Tee2)

Alejo Dao'ud Rodriguez

Joseph Ross (Tamir)

Elroy Skeete

Willis L. Steele, Jr.

Ossining, New York, May 1998

Notes

1. See "Unhealthy Choice: Prisons over Schools in New York State, How New York State Is Sacrificing Education for Incarceration," a report by Alton R. Waldon Jr., New York state senator, Tenth District, April 1996, p. 6.

A Victim to Passion

Robert Sanchez

*I keep reliving a mistake,
Falling victim to a passion,
Which is not in fashion,
When you're locked up.*

I am

I am

*I am what I am like.
Gertrude Stein is what she
Is what she is.*

*Sentenced to a life without passion,
Is what the honorable justice read,
Though the words weren't said,
I heard them that fateful day in my
head.*

*I am not human
Not yet
Not until the parole board
Says I am
So I go on and on and on
Trying to control my passion until I'm
gone.*

*But
The passion,
The love does not understand
The sentencing structure.
The need is deeply etched in a soul
That is parched in a
SPIRIT
That refuses to let go of what is natural.
So please forgive me,
Yet again,
For
thinking/knowing I can be like them,
Human once again . . .*



Three Strikes. Illustration by G. Young. Courtesy of the artist.

What Does the Ghetto Mean?

Robert Sanchez

*Excuse me for waking you up
out of your nod . . .
But we have a problem that
We Ghetto-licious people must prod*

*Man, what is the problem, brother
What is the problem?*

*The problem is that
The Ghetto is democracy's secret
Kept on the down low
As low as that nod that keeps you
oppressed
Black and Latino struggles
That keep us stressed
Everyone searching for a piece of the
American
Dream on the step of a ladder on a fire
escape
Just waiting
And
Waiting for
A Hero without a cape*

*Brother
Ghetto is street corner bodegas
With Neon Cerveza signs
Blinking
And
Blinking
And
Blinking with
The counter-man
The banker man
The selling pamper-man
The baby-food man
With interest, Man.
Begging for your life savings
In the spirit of Capitalism
The Ghetto is the dopefiends' kingdom
That collapses in the rush of a hit
Collapsing and collapsing*

Like the building down the block

*Where your great grandfather used to live
And your boy now sells pot
The 'hoods artistry long ago burned
Caught on a front page picture
A symbol of Ghetto American Structure
The Ghetto is piss-smelling alleys
Used for a resting place
By men and women
Who settled for the dream found
In a bottle*

*In the smoke coming from a pipe
Not right
Not right
Succumbing to these crack demons
without a fight*

*Listen up people!
We have a serious problem
We Ghetto fabulous
Ghetto-licious
Ghetto marvelous
People
Ain't got no pull
We're human cattle being led
To the slaughterhouse like everything is
cool
With bars as thick as the
Dough we produce*

*With this poem
I look to induce
Thought to
Love yourself
Challenge yourself
Educate yourself
Have pride in yourself
See yourself as the beautiful
Creature that God intended you to be.*

Political Riddles

Bitten, Seduced, and Fooled

Alejo Dao'ud

*Mosquitos! or what would you call
Something that takes a bite out of you,
When you not looking and sucks your
blood
Don't even knowing that it's being done?
All you know is that your left scratching
like///
Ahh! man something bit me man!
Politicians. When that happens I think of
politicians.
I mean you could call it mosquitos or
vampires
But then again vampires don't leave you
scratching
They leave you for dead . . .
But they're all the same
Mosquitos, politicians, vampires
They're all blood suckers, sucking the
blood out of suckers
You and me. Feeding off of you and me
Suckers/tricks like///*

*Prostitution! Or what would you call
being taxed
For a promised behavior? Promises that'll
make you feel
As though you're being taken care of
And where the money paid eventually goes
To some pimp in a stretch limo?
Now you could call this organized
prostitution,
But I call it politics. You see,
Minus the actual release, the climax, the
sex
Politics are screwing a whole lot of people
By the millions and making millions
turning tricks.*

*Still politics and tricky, tricky, tricky
Political Pimps
Pimpin' in a game of confidence, a con
man's confidence
Could never be played without believers
Believe that there's an easy way to get
over.
In the game like///*

*Three Card Monte! or what would you call
Placing a bet on a card that's not even
there?
Praying the way people play Lotto
Dreaming to hit a number.
And believing that it's worth the gamble,
And if worst comes to worst we trust
That the proceeds will go to some social
institutions
Like our city schools,
But neither of us ever hit that number and
When we look at our city schools
The money ain't there either.
But somehow still politicians can always
find more money to build more prisons . . .
From a dollar and a dream and you too
Can have your children in a cell.///*

*Now you can call this just placing a dollar
bet,
But me, I call it a damn shame.
A police state. Or what would you call
Apartheid Americano?
With 99% of the population on one side of
bank
And 1% on the other side.
Capitalism at its best—capitalizing on
ignorance*

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And people ignoring it
Too busy to get involved with it
Too busy digging their own grave in it
This White Collar violence.
The evil, the criminal
The political that people vote for
If they show to vote at all///

And you know, it was Malcolm who said:
Revolution: "The Bullet or the Ballot"
But people still don't vote and the bullets
We use we use to kill each other.
While Martin said: It was "Non Violence"
but he didn't say
Pray and wait and non-participate
A pacifist is pacified and satisfied with lies
Martin was anything but pacified
And satisfied with lies
He was, get in your face, involved.
He was involved, get in your face—
involved
Get involved: ask why
Why we hear more about the Middle East
Than we do about real figures of Police
brutality? Why?
Why do Americans spend more money on
entertainment than education?
Why?
Why? Is it because it is easier to dance,
sing, get the video,
Drink, smoke weed, play ball or tell the
joke
Than it is to learn about the reality
Of the joke being played on us///

Or is it that learning bears knowledge
And knowledge bears a responsibility
And responsibility makes you bear the
stand

Makes us understand
Why we need to take a stand
Like Malcolm and Martin took a stand
The best way they knew how
Like Geronimo Pratt took a stand,
Like Dhuruba Moore, Assata Shukur
Took a stand like the Puerto Rican 15,
The American Indian Movement, The New
York Three
Albizu Campos, Loita Lebron, George
Jackson, Angela Davis
Took a stand the best way they knew how.
The best way they knew how
Imprisoned, Exiled, and Assassinated

Now this the riddle:
How is it that we keep looking for the
sixties
To help us define our 21st Century?
When the sixties was the sixties for the
sixties
If we really want to honor the
contributions
Of lives that people gave—the lives
That we have benefit from
We don't forget, but we don't stay stuck,
the riddle
Is in the paradox
But we must still
Move forward
The struggle changes as time changes the
journey
But the real question inside the
Theme stays the same
Is it better to be in the fight for freedom
Than to fight off the feeling of being
Bitten, Seduced, and Fooled
Mosquitos, Prostitution, and Gambling
For our lives?