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The End of Islands: Drawing Insight from Revelation to Respond to Prisoner Radicalization and Apocalyptically-Oriented Terrorism

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Abstract: This paper is an exploratory exercise in practical theology and interfaith engagement that probes the conceptual frameworks of insularity (Islandness) and incarceration in Revelation in order to address the related problems of prisoner radicalization and apocalyptically-oriented terrorism. It offers an experimental reading of Revelation performed through the lenses of island studies, criminology, and research on prisoner radicalization. While inmates may adopt a range of religious dispositions, Islam is the fastest-growing religion in U.S. prisons. Moreover, even though Islam is not inherently violent nor are Muslims more predisposed to radical behaviors than other religious groups, some forms of prison Islam promote brutal apocalyptic worldviews and incite adherents to violence. This paper examines the place Revelation maintains in Islamic apocalyptic thought and asks how Revelation can assist in the fight against radicalization among an increasingly Muslim inmate population. Islands, prisons, and prisoners share a robust set of real and metaphorical relationships. The islanded nature of John's experience provides a valuable point of access for incarcerated readers who find themselves in similarly marginalized social locations where radical readings are more likely to occur. Reading the insular and carceral elements of Revelation in tandem with these bodies of research is instructive for cultivating constructive responses to the present set of problems. It is argued that while Revelation can be a potential source of violent ideologies, it also offers its own internal checks against violent enactments. John's vision culminates in the end of islands (Rev 21:1). The overarching goal of this essay is to ask how we might point readers in physically and ideologically insular environments toward constructive interpretations of *apocalyptic* in order to stem the persistent problem of violent radicalization.

Keywords: book of revelation; apocalyptic; prisoner radicalization; insularity; incarceration

1. Introduction

The island setting of John's Apocalypse has received significant consideration. Of equal importance, though less explored, is the fact that John's revelatory account also contains multiple carceral images. What follows is an exercise in practical theology and interfaith engagement that probes Revelation's conceptual frameworks of insularity (Islandness) and incarceration in order to engage the related problems of prisoner radicalization and apocalyptically-oriented terrorism.

This project grew out of a broader inquiry into the function of religious texts like Revelation in interpretive environments situated beyond traditional ecclesial settings. There are presently more

than 1.6 million incarcerated persons in the United States.¹ Approximately one-third of them profess religious affiliation of one kind or another.² Many of these inmates, including ones who self-identify as non-religious, spend considerable time reading religious texts since they are deemed not only acceptable, but prescribed, inmate reading material. Thus, I offer an experimental reading of Revelation that explores the ways marginalizing readings of *apocalyptic* can develop and persist in marginal environments and among marginalized readers.

While inmates may adopt a range a religious dispositions, Islam is the fastest-growing religion in U.S. prisons. Even though Islam is not inherently violent nor are Muslims more predisposed to radical behaviors than any other religious group, some forms of prison Islam promote brutal apocalyptic worldviews and incite adherents to violence. Accordingly, this paper examines the place Revelation maintains in Islamic apocalyptic thought and asks how Revelation can assist in the fight against radicalization among an increasingly Muslim inmate population.

In this reading, which is performed through the lenses of island studies, criminology, and the research on prisoner radicalization, I argue that Revelation is both a potential source of violent ideologies and a solution to such problematic interpretations. Furthermore, I propose a set of suggestions for how society might engage the reception, interpretation, and application of apocalyptic texts like Revelation in ways that honor the heritages of the texts and social locations of this demographic of readers.

John's Apocalypse invites its audience to peer behind a cosmic veil separating earthly and heavenly domains in order to witness the already-but-not-yet establishment of God's redemptive work throughout the cosmos. The question is, to what extent does the invitation to see what God is doing include an exhortation to act on God's behalf? Although a plain-sense reading of Revelation finds a clear message of non-violent endurance of oppression and persecution (Rev 6:9–11; 12:11; 13:9–10), some readers insert themselves into the narrative as the primary agents by which divine justice is brought to the world, often doing so through violent means that are foreign to the text itself.

Violent enactments of religious belief are perennial and are commonly identified as products of religious extremism or "radicalization."³ Addressing the problem of religious radicalization requires understanding its history and cultivating a realistic set of expectations about its future. Religious radicalization is not a modern problem, nor is it likely to ever fully disappear from the social landscape. Radicalization is also not a uniquely religious phenomenon and can occur wherever deeply-held convictions intersect with desires for profound and lasting social change.⁴ Religious radicalization that eventuates in violent ideologies and actions proceeds from similar social convictions but is typically augmented by the addition of sacred texts to the catalytic milieu. Such texts provide mythic imagery and alternative systems of cosmic chronology that are applied to modern people and events.⁵ Reading these symbolically dense texts in ideologically isolated communities or physically isolated

¹ When one considers the total correctional population, which is made up of all offenders under the supervision of adult correctional systems, including those serving probation and other non-prison consequences, the total jumps to 6 million. (Kaeble and Cowhig 2018).

² (Hamm 2009, p. 667).

³ Despite the ubiquity of the term in twenty-first century reality, a universally agreed-upon definition of *radicalization* remains elusive. In her extensive literature review featuring differing kinds of radicalization including versions oriented around religion, political action, animal rights, disability, feminism, and environmentalism, Melissa Deary identifies 10 attributes shared across the spectrum of occurrences. Radicalization: (1) seeks *rootedness* in a fast-changing world (2) is a *normative* concept (3) can be *pejorative* (4) is *conflict-oriented* and is particularly amenable to *single-issue* politics (5) is *dualistic* (6) is about *action* (7) is a *process* (8) is *cultural* (9) is *spatial, temporal, and biological* (10) is *amenable to positivism*. (Dearey 2010, pp. 1–46).

⁴ (Fraih 2008, p. 135). See also, (Hamm 2008, 2013).

⁵ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko have identified some mechanisms of individual, group, and mass-level radicalization and associated prominent individuals embodying each mechanism. These categories are applicable, but not limited to the kinds of prison radicalization and religiously motivated terrorism under consideration in this project: *Individual-level mechanisms of radicalization*: Personal grievance (Chechen Black Widows); Group grievance (including "lone-wolf" terrorists: Ted Kaczynski, Mohammed Reza Taheri-azar); Slippery slope ("Jihadist Next Door" Omar Hammami); Love (Red Army Faction, BrigadeRosse); Risk and Status (Abu-Musabal-Zarqawi); Unfreezing (9/11 bombers). *Group level mechanisms of radicalization*: Group Polarization (Weather Underground); Group Competition vs. state (condensation: Weather Underground from SDS); Group Competition vs. non-state groups ('outbidding': PFLP to Jihad); Group Competition vs. faction within group (fission: IRA); Group Isolation/Threat (underground group, cult, squad in combat).

environments, like prisons, can lead to interpretations that do violence to the texts and that encourage violence in response to them.

Some have called for a moratorium on religious and public uses of apocalyptic texts because of the propensity towards maleficent interpretation and enactment.⁶ Nevertheless, I argue here that the solution to ending destructive readings of *apocalypica* like Revelation is not found by discarding the texts but by engaging them more fully. Thus, as a heuristic exploration, this paper analyses the role apocalyptic literature plays in the process of radicalization and argues that Revelation offers assistance in ameliorating destructive extremist behaviors.

The tropes of insularity and incarceration transcend the contexts of John's original audience to the modern world.⁷ Bearing out the pertinence of these motifs for the present situation, I begin with a discussion of the real and metaphorical parallels between islands, prisons, and prisoners. This is followed by an explanation of how sacred texts are operationalized for extreme ends in insular and carceral contexts. A subsequent exploration of U.S. prison demographics shows that the dominant religion among inmates is Islam. I explore what it means for Muslim inmates to read Revelation even though it is not authoritative Islamic Scripture. In the process of doing so, I address the reception history of Revelation among later Islamic literature while also discussing the analogs and tensions found between Revelation and Islamic apocalyptic thought. Finally, I present a reading of John's Apocalypse that is conversant with elements of Islamist ideology and praxis. Drawing on Revelation's internal critiques of violence and insularity, I propose interpretations that foreground a message of God's restoration and liberation of faithful witnesses and ask how Muslim readers might experience both as the fruits of their faithful praxis.

2. Islands, Prisons, and Prisoners

Islands, prisons, and prisoners share a robust set of real and metaphorical connections. Societies use islands and prisons as sites for both punishment and rehabilitation. Those deemed "deviants" are gathered to both figurative and literal islands where broader society intends the processes of formative separation and reorientation to occur. For Greco-Roman island prisoners/exiles and those of American island prisons like Guantanamo, Alcatraz, or Riker's Island, the use of an isolated geography as a carceral site accomplishes more than relocation or detainment. The intention is to strip the punished individual of connection to known place and to assert the claim that society's controlling reach stretches beyond traditionally conceived political and physical boundaries.⁸ Island studies scholar Godfrey Baldacchino has directly linked the process of incarceration with the practice of "islanding" people.⁹ Though, as Baldacchino, and other criminologists observe, positive outcomes to such "rehabilitative" isolation are difficult to guarantee.

Frequently envisioned as detached or floating landscapes, islands break from the temporal and spatial norms of mainland geographies.¹⁰ Islands can be places of refuge or inescapable places of isolation, torment and torture. Even if not places of exile or incarceration, islands assert their own liminality and boundedness.¹¹ Prisons are also liminal and bounded spaces where mundane aspects of life are condensed and intensified.¹²

Mass level mechanisms of radicalization: Jujitsu Politics (AI Qaeda vs. U.S.); *Hatred* (Neo-Nazis); *Martyrdom* (Sayyid Qutb). (McCauley and Moskalenko 2016).

⁶ (Fenn 2006).

⁷ Christy Constantakopoulou highlights the key role of Islandness in the Greco-Roman thought-world that is John's authorial context. She writes, "[I]nsularity as a concept, or, what it means to be an island, is, perhaps, not surprisingly, central for many key ideas in Greek history: safety, danger, *prison*, *isolation*, poverty, contempt, sea power, and perhaps more importantly, the notion of imperialism." (Constantakopoulou 2007, p. 1). Emphasis added.

⁸ (Mountz and Loyd 2014).

⁹ (Baldacchino 2016).

¹⁰ (Pothou 2015, pp. 189–90).

¹¹ (Royle and Brinklow 2018, pp. 3–20; Staniscia 2011, 2013).

¹² (Royle and Brinklow 2018, p. 10).

Through their separation, islands can be incubators of distinct biomes and cultures. Yet, most islands, including those that are far-flung and ocean-bound, are not wholly disconnected from other landmasses as is sometimes imagined. Rather, as frontier spaces, islands are sites of exchange and influence between mainland regions and other islands. Inasmuch, islands bear an important synecdochic relationship with the mainland and often function as sensors of impending mutability. It is islands that commonly evince the effects of environmental and social change more quickly and intensely than their mainland counterparts.¹³ Prisons share these characteristics of connectivity and synecdoche. As with islands, the initial appearance of prisons as isolated and self-contained systems gives way to the realities of their dependence upon and influence over larger entities. Thus, Michel Foucault rightly argued that prisons are, in many respects, representative institutions of the societies that create them.¹⁴

Like island geographies, carceral spaces can dissolve commonly-experienced modes of space and time.¹⁵ Existence can take on an atemporal character in confinement. The dissolution of standard time allows alternative cosmic maps and chronologies associated with much apocalyptic thought to develop into totalizing worldviews and extreme ideologies.

People are sometimes portrayed as islands.¹⁶ Many prisoners express a sense of disorientation and loneliness even though they are surrounded by other inmates and guards. This feeling is often exacerbated by the reality that inmates are under constant supervision and surveillance. One such inmate aptly applies a metaphor of insularity to his experience when he describes himself as being “alone in the midst of this sea of humanity.”¹⁷

While extremist ideologies can be products of individual isolation, they are more commonly generated and enacted in the context of insular groups where individuals with greater social need are exploited by those in positions of power.¹⁸ In order to cope with the crushing social stress of prison life, inmates frequently turn to available social networks. Unfortunately, many such networks are oriented toward less-than-beneficial ends and inmates are often caught in the complex and dangerous web of inter-carceral crime. While violent expressions may derive from an individual’s initial experiences of personal crisis, trauma, or victimization, recalcitrantly violent dispositions often foment through one’s integration into a group where a culture of militancy prevails.¹⁹ Instances of radicalization that follow these patterns are not limited to un-educated, under-privileged, or mentally unstable individuals, as is commonly thought. There are many well-educated, wealthy and socially-influential individuals who have also followed the path of radicalization.²⁰

3. From Texts to Terror

The move from adopting extremist ideologies to manifesting violent behaviors often begins from the place of sincere conviction and a desire to right perceived social maladies. Radicalization is

¹³ (Staniscia 2011, pp. 46–48).

¹⁴ (Foucault 1977).

¹⁵ (Moran 2012).

¹⁶ (Brinklow 2012).

¹⁷ (Stern 2014, p. 100).

¹⁸ (Silke 2014, p. 3); Research has shown that the concept of “lone terrorists” is a rare if actual thing. Even when individuals commit acts of terror as apparent “lone wolves,” an overwhelming number operate with implicit social associations to larger groups. See (Hoffman 2018).

¹⁹ Joshua Sinai identifies seven phases that radicalized prisoners often experience. Beginning on the personal level and moving through increasingly socialized and public displays of radical behavior, Sinai’s seven phases articulate the cyclically intensifying nature of radicalization. (Sinai 2014, pp. 38–46).

²⁰ Researchers of radicalization frequently point to the case of Kevin James, an American citizen who converted to Islam in prison, radicalized, and formed the Assembly for Authentic Islam. James propounded the destruction of all enemies of Islam and encouraged violent attacks against U.S. military personnel and non-Jewish as well as Jewish supporters of the State of Israel. James also worked diligently to recruit and convert others who could actualize his plans for terror upon their release. Cf. (Gartenstein-Ross 2006; Hamm 2008, 2013; Dugas and Kruglanski 2014); The Assembly for Authentic Islam is commonly referred to as JIS which is a transliteration of the Arabic initials for *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam* (جمعیت علمائے اسلام).

commonly associated with some kind of religious conviction, though it need not always be. Those instantiations which are religious in character frequently derive elements from Abrahamic traditions, mainly Christianity and Islam. The instigators of extremist perspectives among different religious sects are legion, but many adherents are influenced by the interpretation and application of those sacred texts which are central to the respective religions.²¹ Moreover, while the aims and tactics of various groups may differ, most share the supposition that they are agents of change in a cosmic battle for the fate of the universe.²²

Inmates are granted access to a range of fictional literature but are also allowed to read selected non-fictional material deemed educational, including magazines and newspapers that are often pre-censored. Even though inmate reading material is heavily monitored, all prisoners are granted access to religious texts. Religious education of prisoners has long been a cornerstone of the U.S. corrections system, but has primarily focused on Judeo-Christian texts. Several court rulings in the 1950s and 60s increased access to religious material for inmates and broadened the spectrum of acceptable religious literature.²³ Unfortunately, the prison system is not well-equipped to comprehensively vet the nature of all religious material flowing through correctional facilities and thus, much of it remains a formidable source of misinformation for many inmates.

Although violent religious extremism has existed for millennia, attempts at systematic de-radicalization are relatively new. Approximately 40 countries currently have programs intended to rehabilitate radicalized individuals.²⁴ Despite the growing popularity of such programs, few studies have been conducted to identify the most efficacious methods. In many cases, theological training is not a part of rehabilitative processes. This paper suggests that it should be.²⁵

A proper discussion of the place of apocalyptic literature in the process of religious radicalization requires an explication of the religious landscape of Western prisons. By official accounts, Islam is the fastest-growing religion among North American and European inmates.²⁶ Ammar and Couture-Carron link the growth of Islam in American prisons to the rapid rise of African American prisoners beginning in the 1980s.²⁷ This period witnessed the compositional transformation of U.S. prisons from primarily Caucasian and Christian to African American and Muslim populations, demographic changes that the prison system has yet to adapt to.

Because Islam is the predominant religion of Western inmates, we must consider connections between sources of Islamic apocalyptic thought and those of traditions that preceded it temporally. It should be clarified: This essay is not arguing that Muslims are more likely to commit acts of terror. Unfortunately, a 2013 Pew Study conducted after the Boston Marathon bombings found that

²¹ (Juergensmeyer 2003, pp. 148–66). See also, (Koehler 2012).

²² Apocalyptic forms of radical Christian terrorist groups like the Christian Identity Movement and Aryan Brotherhood are related through similar apocalyptic notions and conspiracy theories of government intervention and control. Likewise, Al-Qaeda, ISIS/ISIL and various forms of violent prison/gang Islam are connected by desires for social change, the advent of a time of divine judgement, and the arrival of Paradise. All of these groups share in their appeal to apocalyptic literature and imagery for the formulations of their ideologies.

²³ See (U.S. Department of Justice 2011); The issue of prisoner access to texts other than religious material continues to be raised in U.S. courts. One recent case saw the ACLU and U.S. Department of Justice challenge a detention center in South Carolina over the prohibition of all reading material except the Bible. Cf. (ACLU 2011).

²⁴ Susan M. Collins, the chair of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, identified the complex nature of the issue before Congress in 2006 when she asked, "How can prison authorities identify the teachings that incite violence while respecting the right of inmates to have access to religious materials?" This particular session was oriented towards constructively engaging the question of radicalization among Muslim prisoners in U.S. prisons. Collins remarked, "Our concern is not with prison inmates converting to Islam . . . Our concern is instead with those who would use prisons as places to indoctrinate inmates with a hateful ideology that incites adherents to commit violent acts." (Gartenstein-Ross 2006) (Opening Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins).

²⁵ (Koehler 2016, pp. 290–95). Frances Flannery has shown that attempts to solve the problem of radicalization fall short when policy makers do not consider apocalyptic texts as catalysts of radical behavior. She asserts, "When the governing framework of radical apocalyptic terrorism is not well understood, we can take policy steps that actually worsen the situation and create unintended consequences." (Flannery 2016, p. 108); See also (Cook 2015).

²⁶ (Hamm 2013, p. 43).

²⁷ (Ammar and Couture-Carron 2015, pp. 97–113).

42% of Americans thought Islam was more likely to encourage violence than other faiths.²⁸ As of 2016, that number was down by only one percent.²⁹ Many inmates convert to Islam because of the support and discipline it affords. Criminologists have lauded the positive role Islam plays in the lives of many inmates by touting it as a source of “*structure and sense of identity*.”³⁰ Islam is not intrinsically oriented toward violence or radicalization, and the problem of radicalization is not one with which most converts to Islam struggle. Yet, we must contend with the fact that some adopt and perpetuate radicalized forms of prison Islam. Thus, what I present here is not an excoriation of Muslim inmates writ large but an attempt to show that vulnerable populations in our prisons are susceptible to radicalization simply because such readings and radicalization are more likely to occur in insular contexts.

Historically, Muslim scholars eschewed the use of the Bible as a source text for apocalyptic authority, concentrating more on the relevance and applicability of Islamic sources.³¹ This prohibitive stance toward biblical apocalyptic authority has, however, not always been maintainable. One of the main groups involved in creating and expanding Muslim apocalyptic traditions were Jewish and Christian converts to Islam who integrated content from extra-biblical literature of 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra and 1 and 3 Enoch.³² Each of these texts presents a unique set of responses to periods of physical and cultural exile, themes which modern readers draw on in literal and figurative ways.

Furthermore, the apocalyptic texts circulating among Jewish and Christian communities in the first century deeply informed Christian theology for the next 600 years. By the advent of Islam, some of those theological elements and apocalyptic motifs were already deeply engrained in broader eastern Mediterranean religious identities.³³ Such motifs rooted in Jewish and Christian sources are widely present in the *Sunna* and *Hadith* which derive related elements from exposure to the biblical text of Revelation and its reception history. Therein, one finds carry-over of the “great city as a whore” metaphor propounded in Revelation and in later Islamic writing where the destruction of Babylon the Whore/Constantinople the Whore (Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς / *Al-qusṭantīniyya al-zāniyya*) is symbolic of a coming moment of eschatological justice.

The *hadith* contain explications of *fitan* (trials) and *malāḥim* (wars) that await in future days. These are part of the great chaos ensuing in the final days often referred to as the *asrat al-sā'a* (the signs of the hour) which lead up to the last judgement. Likewise, other Islamic apocalyptic sources are concerned with the appearance of the *Mahdī*, a messianic figure whose name means “rightly guided one” in Arabic, and his anodyne who is often referred to as *al-dağğal* or *al-Sufyāni* (the anti-messiah).³⁴ Some envision these representatives of good and evil are poised to meet in a final battle preceding a Day of Judgement.³⁵ This is apparent in the theological associations cultivated between the place of Armageddon in Jewish/Christian thought and that of Dabiq in Islamic thought. In both instances, physical geography has been overlaid with apocalyptic symbolism in order to provide a place and time for the initiation of the end of all things.³⁶

Modern Islamist leaders like Osama bin-Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri have publicly rejected *apocalyptic* as the basis for their theology and political strategies. Yet, an increasing number of

²⁸ (Pew Research Center 2013).

²⁹ (Pew Research Center 2016).

³⁰ Hamm, *The Spectacular Few*, p. 48.

³¹ Although the whole of the Qur'an is eschatologically oriented, it features few direct apocalyptic thematic carryovers from biblical sources. One such case is the mention of Gog and Magog, which is derived from the book of Ezekiel. Cf. (Flannery 2016, p. 101; Livne-Kafri 2006, p. 397; Ostřanský 2013; Arjomand 2000).

³² The sacred texts of these Jewish converts were themselves influenced by Persian and Mesopotamian sources. (Cohn 1999; Livne-Kafri 1999, 2007; Sanders 2009).

³³ Livne-Kafri, “Migrations,” pp. 468–69.

³⁴ Livne-Kafri, “Jerusalem in Early Islam,” pp. 382, 402–3.

³⁵ (McCants 2016, pp. 22–29).

³⁶ One can find further examples of such theological and geographic symbolic overlay in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's online publications *Inspire* and *Inspire Guide* which were issued from 2010 through 2016.

extremists are turning to apocalyptic literature, including the Bible, as the source of inspiration for radical ideologies. This is intensely apparent amidst populations of inmates who court extreme religio-political ideologies.³⁷ Resurgent apocalyptic tropes even make their way into the marginalia of study Qur'ans as supplementary interpretive material for their readers. Such is the case with "The Noble Qur'an," a widely-distributed ultra-conservative translation of the Qur'an in American prisons.³⁸ Connecting the text of the Qur'an to the broader thematic motifs and historical interpretations is not in itself problematic; it becomes so when it cultivates selectively dispensationalist or violent interpretations.

4. An Exploratory Reading of Revelation's Insular and Carceral Spaces

Revelation witnesses the end of islands. What does this mean for the reading and interpretation of this text in insular/carceral spaces? Given the enormous breadth and impact of selectively literalist and dispensational readings of apocalyptic literature, the task of training readers to see the larger vision of Revelation is daunting. Yet, as a source of several shared themes and images between Christian and Muslim traditions, Revelation can provide guidance for Muslim and Christian readers alike.

Revelation is undeniably a Christo-centric text, however, this exploratory reading is not an attempt at Christian evangelism or a move to inspire conversion. Instead, it endeavors to help Muslim readers draw more constructively on their own religious traditions. The hope is for incarcerated readers, who are increasingly Muslim in religious orientation, to see theological elements in Revelation that are consonant with Islam and that may offer modes for cultivating non-violent worldviews. Such an approach encourages readings that spiritualize violent elements. This kind of reading has been championed by some commentators like Graeme Wood who advocates for helping conservative Muslims (specifically Wahhabis and Salafists) to practice traditionally quietest strains of Islam.³⁹

Inmates need access to trained teachers who can lead them in constructive interpretations. However, the currently over-burdened corrections system lacks trained Christian and Muslim religious officials.⁴⁰ Experts point to atrocious chaplain-to-inmate ratios like 20 imams for 300,000 inmates in California and 10 imams in the entire Federal prison system.⁴¹ Assuming for a moment that all personnel problems were resolved, it is worth considering the kind of readings that religious leaders

³⁷ McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse*, pp. 28–29. For a full discussion of the rejuvenation of apocalyptic tradition in recent times, see (*Amanat* 2000).

³⁸ The difficulty of discerning and vetting appropriate reading material is highlighted by David Gartenstein-Ross in his 2006 presentation to the Congressional meeting of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. There, Gartenstein-Ross spoke of the distribution of "The Noble Qur'an," an English translation of the Qur'an with parallel commentary and interpretive appendices, in U.S. prisons. He pointed specifically to the text's explications of *jihad* as evidence that an external actor, identified as the Muslim charity organization *Al-Hamamain*, was working to indoctrinate inmates with a radicalized understanding of violent *jihad* through the framework of prison *dawah* programs. *Dawah* (دعوة) is the Islamic concept of invitation of initiates to the Muslim faith and of invitation of adherents to a deeper understanding of the faith through study and praxis. Al Haramain has been identified as a supporter of terrorist activity in the United States and abroad. Of note is its involvement in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, its funding of the Indonesian *Jemaah Islamiyah* (الجماعة الإسلامية), and its financial collaboration with the *Makhtab al-Khedemat* (مكتب الخدمات) terrorist group in Afghanistan which was funded by Osama bin-Laden. The organization has been subsumed under the auspices of the Saudi National Commission for Relief and Charity Work Abroad. (*Gartenstein-Ross* 2006) (Statement of David Gartenstein-Ross, Senior Consultant, Gerard Group International, and Co-Chairman, Counterterrorism Foundation).

³⁹ Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants", pp. 31–35.

⁴⁰ Ammar and Couture-Carron note, "The increasing number of Muslim inmates in US prisons coupled with the lack of budgetary and staffing resources affected the ability of overcrowded correctional facilities to carefully screen and process ministers and volunteers for minority religions. As a result, inmates were left to either mentor each other or be mentored by chaplains who were unqualified to work within correctional facilities . . . [T]he shortage of qualified chaplains who have the potential to reduce radical Islam in US prisons has been an ongoing and unsolved problem for correctional facilities for over two decades." (*Ammar and Couture-Carron* 2015, p. 98).

⁴¹ Hamm, "Prisoner Radicalization," p. 6. One potential source of the dearth of Muslim religious leaders in carceral contexts is associated with Islamic conceptions of leadership. According to Ammar and Couture-Carron, "Chaplaincy in prison is a particularly US-created institution . . . [I]n traditional Islam there is no clergy or hierarchical religious order. The spiritual relationship in normative Islam is between the individual and God (Gilliat-Ray, 2008)." Ammar and Couture-Carron, "Imams in Prison," p. 100.

might pursue in insular/incarcerated contexts. What follows is a succinct exploration of the various insular and carceral tropes in Revelation:

Revelation is a text is replete with prisons (φυλακῆ), chains (ἄλυσισ), locked gates (πύλη), keys (κλεισ), and key-holders (Rev 1:18; 2:10; 3:7–8; 9:1–11; 18:2; 20:1–3, 7; 21:12, 15, 21, 25; 22:14). Other carceral spaces in the text include Hades (ὁ ᾗδης) and the Abyss (ὁ ἄβυσσος), which serve as holding places for earthly and divine beings and require keys for entry. John himself may have been imprisoned on Patmos, the island-site of his revelatory experience.⁴² Moreover, some of John's original audience had presumably endured arrest or imprisonment. Revelation's carceral tropes were likely not lost on them.

At the beginning of the direct addresses to the assemblies in Asia minor, the church at Smyrna, receives the news that "the Devil is about to throw some of you into prison" (φυλακῆ), for a period of ten days of testing (2:10). Additionally, the commendation to the Philadelphian church identifies Christ as the "one who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens," and who proclaims, "Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut" (3:7–8). The same chapter contains another reference to a door, this time one which is closed and at which Jesus stands and knocks, awaiting its opening by those in Laodicea (3:20). The reproach of the assembly in Laodicea is followed by the opening of a door in heaven and a command to John to "Come up here" where he will see "what is to come" (4:1).

There is a break in the imagery of doors and prisons in chapters four through eight. Chapter nine resumes more overt carceral imagery. During the vision of the first woe, readers are introduced to the fallen star. He has temporarily been given keys to the shaft of the Abyss from which horse- and human-like locusts rise out of the smoke to torture those who do not bear the seal of God (9:1–10). The chapter continues with the release of the four angels "bound at the river Euphrates" (τοὺς δεδεμένους) (9:14–15). In chapter 20, John witnesses an angel descending from heaven with the key to the Abyss in hand to bind up (ἔδησεν) the Dragon and to throw him into the Abyss before it is "locked" (ἔκλεισεν) and "sealed" (ἐσφράγισεν) for 1000 years. After the thousand-year period is over, Satan will be released from "his prison" (τῆς φυλακῆς αὐτοῦ). He will be allowed to deceive the earth once more before being thrown along with the beast, the false prophet, Death and Hades, and "anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life" into the "second death" that is the lake of fire and sulfur (20:7–10, 14–15). Ironically, this lake has no islands on which to take refuge. John's vision of the new Jerusalem is the text's final instantiation of carceral imagery. This heavenly version of the earthly city is surrounded by a high wall adorned with twelve gates (πύλη), each being made with a single pearl [εἷς ἑκάστος τῶν πυλώνων ἦν ἐξ ἑνὸς μαργαρίτου] (21:12–21). The gates are never closed but appear to be guarded by their respective angels (21:12, 25–27).

Revelation not only displays an understanding of the important relationship between insularity and incarceration that was maintained in Greco-Roman social thought, it also trades on island and carceral imagery derived from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The language of bondage and liberation is widespread throughout the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. These carceral spaces are less obvious in their representation as they include many sites of detainment and imprisonment beyond the overt designation of "prison" (φυλακῆ/רִבְסָה). John consistently draws from these broader metaphorical wellsprings. The Hebrew lexeme יָ, often translated "island" or "coastland," is found throughout the

⁴² The nature of John's presences on Patmos remains disputed. If he was indeed a prisoner, as some suggest, the degree of his punitive experience and tenure on the island is unattainable. Scholars do not know if his tenure there was indefinite (*deportatio ad insulium*) or if he was relegated there for a time and then permitted to leave (*relegatio ad insulium*). There are even suggestions that John traveled to Patmos on his own volition. Present evidence indicates that Patmos was not a penal colony although, it could certainly be one of several island-locales where mainlanders were sent to fulfill sentences of relocation or exile. This is especially likely given the reality that Patmos, if not a prison island, was at least an island of military significance that played a significant role in the protection of the city of Miletus. See (Saffrey 1975). If evidence from other accounts of island relegations/deportations are indicative of larger trends in Greco-Roman penal practices, John would likely have been able to interact with the island population of Patmos while living there as a banished mainlander. Cf. (Koester 2014, pp. 239–43).

Septuagint as νήσος (islands) and ἔθνος (nations). These marginal geographies are descriptive of the “ends of the earth” and the furthest locations of God’s revealed glory.

John draws heavily from the book of Isaiah. In the chapter leading into one of Isaiah’s messianic passages of divine salvation, the islands are called forth to witness the judgement of God (Is 41:1). It is the islands (אִיִּם) that “have seen and are afraid; the ends of the earth tremble” (Is 41:5). As the divine servant of YHWH is introduced in the following chapter, readers learn that the islands wait expectantly for the teachings of the one who will “bring forth justice to the nations” (Is 42: 1, 4). In response, the people of God are expected to act as agents of liberation whose faithful witness will serve “to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon; from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Is. 42:7). In these acts of liberation, YHWH declares a refrain that John will hear again at the revelation of the new Heaven and Earth; “The former things have come to pass” [הָרֵאשִׁיטוֹת הַגְּדִיבָא וְהַדְּשׁוֹת] (Is 42:9)/ οὐκ ἔσται ἔτι, [ἔτι] τὰ πρῶτα ἀπῆλθαν (Rev 21:4).

Echoed elsewhere throughout Isaiah are claims that expectation and realization of YHWH’s liberation and glory will be proclaimed among the islands (51:5–6; 24:15). These glorious deeds of salvation will come through YHWH’s servant, who is “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Is 53:7; Rev 5:12, 7:14, 12:11, 13:8, 14:1). Beyond the prophetic books, the Psalms consistently declare that all Creation will rouse to praise God and witness the unveiling of God’s reign. Islands play a central role in this adulation. The Psalmist proclaims, “YHWH is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many islands be glad” (Ps 97:1). Together, these passages suggest that worship functions as a mechanism of integration and reunification. The furthest sites of marginalization and isolation will declare God’s might and justice and, in the process, they will be joined with the rest of Creation.

What elements of this exegesis are applicable to the problem of Islamist radicalization? Here I present my own recommendations for bridging the worlds of Revelation and those of incarcerated Muslim readers:

The metaphor of insularity offers several points of connection between modern Muslim readers and John’s original audience. As already noted, insularity played a significant role in the history of Greco-Roman political critique. The belief that islands were emergent and floating landscapes informed understandings of the contested nature of political stability and the transience of political regimes. The expectation that the political landscape would not persist indefinitely brought solace for some. Such hope persisted among early Christian critiques of empire and still colors modern Salafist and Wahabist judgements leveled against the Western nation-state system.⁴³

The notion of cultural humiliation plays strongly into the ideologies of many Islamist extremists. Though separated by the centuries, John’s audience and Muslim populations share an eschatologically-oriented resistance to cultural assimilation and imperial domination. Messages of freedom from historical oppression of the West and from the cultural dominance of Western institutions resonate among prisoners and those who feel victimized by these systems. Both groups have also envisioned themselves as islands of hope in a sea of political and moral chaos. It is for this reason that adherents to more conservative branches of Islam may find that Revelation can also constructively direct their resistance to imperialism and idolatry through its cyclical revisiting of divine sovereignty and rightly-oriented worship.⁴⁴

As a genre, *apocalyptic* frequently enumerates the destruction of that which causes religious/spiritual impurity, albeit often at the hands of a divine figure. On the island of Patmos, John experiences the fullness of reality in a way that his mainlander audience needs to see but cannot quite see from their particular vantage point. Through insularity, his awareness of the suffering and

⁴³ (Philips 2012; Qutb n.d.; Zimmerman 2004).

⁴⁴ One of the goals of such an approach is to encourage more traditional readings of these apocalyptic text that spiritualize violent elements of the text. This approach has been championed by some commentators like Graeme Wood who advocates for helping conservative Muslims (specifically Wahhabi and Salafi) to practice the more traditional quietest strains of Islam in authentic ways. (Wood 2015, pp. 31–35).

destruction of the world is clarified. Such is the case for many inmates, not just Muslims, who gain a new or sharper sense of identity once incarcerated. Yet, actualization of desires to bring about rightly-oriented belief and action can result in the othering of individuals and ideas that do not meet the stringent expectations of one's scrutinizing worldview. Again, Revelation offers an antidote to overly compensatory reactions that arise from profound moral concern by imploring its audience to pursue internally-consistent orthodoxy and orthopraxis. To the church in Ephesus, John first announces the divine contempt for the "works of the Nicolaitians" (2:6). This same set of teachings is of concern among some members of the church in Pergamum, who contrary to the Ephesians, have members who subscribe to the Nicolaitian teachings (2:12). Sardis is accused of superficial belief disguised by pernicious abandonment of faithful living (3:1–3). It is the churches of Pergamum and Philadelphia that are praised for their rightly-oriented living where Laodicea is criticized for mediocrity and complacency (Rev 3:12–16). The text's inclusion of these many differing concerns for right practice and belief provides teachers with a fulcrum upon which to leverage better readings of the text among inmates concerned to live out forms of ardent orthodoxy.

The trope of insularity in Revelation speaks directly to instantiations of martyrdom which arise as responses to cultural humiliation. Through their writings, Sayyid Qutb and his successor Ayman Al-Zawahiri have catalyzed many to respond to Western domination through violence, particularly through the mode of suicide or martyrdom killings.⁴⁵ Qutb, who is seen as the father of modern Islamist extremism, was himself imprisoned during the secular regime of Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. It was during this time that he solidified many of his own convictions about internal Islamic reform and the need for Muslim martyrs.⁴⁶ More recently, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's tome entitled *Call to Global Islamic Resistance* has become a sourcebook for many radicals and is associated with a rise in global terror cells as well as a surge in Islamist martyrdom killings.⁴⁷

One of the central questions for John's audience is whether their deaths as witness/testimony (μαρτυρία) to the Gospel will go unavenged (6:9–11). The word that John receives is that justice will indeed prevail for those who have lost their lives, but the only one who must give his life to save others is the Lamb. Regardless of the dating of these portions of the text, the message to their receiving communities is that Christ's death as "the faithful witness" [ὁ μάρτυς, ὁ πιστός] (1:5), who is the Lamb (5:8–9), is the only death that saves others. Those who have suffered and died are commended, but it is Christ who is exalted through humiliation and who brings the humiliated into renewed standing before God.

Not only does John relay divine concerns for misguided doctrine, he also offers a set of divine expectations for orthopraxis amidst ongoing domination and persecution. This call to a particular kind of response relates well to the Islamic concept of *jihad*, an understanding of spiritualized and actual struggle. The task of the righteous worshiper and faithful servant is to resist any temptation to assume the role of ultimate judge and executioner. These roles are reserved for God and God's heavenly servants. There are similar notions of divine sovereignty and human submission within Islam. Qutb himself draws on these to generate his own Islamist ideology. He writes, "Any system in which the final decisions are referred to human beings, and in which the sources of authority are human, defies human beings by designating others than God as lords over men."⁴⁸ Revelation makes it clear: The battle against evil belongs to God, in particular, to Christ who defeats Satan (the dragon) while the rest of heaven and earth look on (19:11–21; 20:1–3). No human inhabitants of the earth are called to assist in the final destruction of evil.⁴⁹ Craig Koester rightly notes that there is no call to holy

⁴⁵ Hamm, *The Spectacular Few*, p. 56; (Jessica 2004).

⁴⁶ (Thompson 2013).

⁴⁷ (Zackie 2013). Despite its influence, Abu Mus'ab's work is now well-known enough among intelligence circles that most inmates do not have direct access to copies.

⁴⁸ Qutb, *Milestones*, p. 58.

⁴⁹ Although humans and most animals do not take part in the final battle against Satan, "the birds of the air" are called forth to eat the flesh of the destroyers of the earth (Rev 19:17–18).

war in Revelation.⁵⁰ This is clearly enunciated in the words, “Let anyone who has an ear listen . . . [I]f you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the holy ones” (13:9, 10b). “Those who conquer,” are those who remain as faithful witnesses of God’s primacy as Creator and Judge (21:7). Rather than proclaiming insularity or violent retribution as the response of the church, John counsels patient endurance (ὑπομονή). This kind of measured engagement is neither accommodation nor alienation. The righteous are repeatedly told that their continued faithful witness is the only necessary action in the battle. Muslim readers of Revelation could very well construct a spiritualized interpretation of *jihad* via Revelation’s call to patient endurance.

5. Conclusions

Awareness of the internal metaphors of insularity and incarceration in Revelation are useful for grappling with the problem of prisoner radicalization. Revelation may not be a primary text of reference for a predominantly Muslim inmate population, but it is a text which bears an influential connection to Muslim apocalyptic thought at the genetic level. If incarcerated readers can become well-trained interpreters of the visions of Revelation, they may well find themselves within the text in new and productive ways.

This exploratory reading of Revelation emphasizes the text’s cyclical patterns of challenge and encouragement. A central tenet of Revelation is that God has already triumphed over the powers of Sin and Death. Each cycle of Revelation brings readers into a place of worship and inspires a worshipful attitude of God the Creator rather than God the destroyer.⁵¹ With the announcement of a renewed heaven and earth, readers also see that “the sea is no more” (21:1). The end of this symbol of chaos also means the end of the islands.⁵² Readers can track the progression in each cycle from chaos to creation and from insularity to community. This is a community which enjoys new rights of access to God and to the benefits of citizenship in a holy nation. Inclusion in such a community can be a powerful source of change, especially for inmates who have lost significant rights associated with their national citizenship. In this way, the end of islands can be the beginning of reconciliation and the reunification of those marginalized spaces and people with their mainland counterparts.

Finally, this project does not naively presuppose that all terrorists or potential terrorists can be constructively remediated. In resonance with the work of counter-terrorism experts, I recognize that there is a population of individuals who are likely the best recipients of this kind of interpretive intervention. As Daniel Koehler recognizes, “Candidates have to have some sort of cognitive opening, some motivation to participate, some crack in their ideology or in their life that makes them susceptible to the intervention.”⁵³ Addressing the reception and interpretation of *apocalyptic* in the lives of potentially violently-oriented religious extremists is one strategy that could contribute to the desired outcome of de-radicalization. It may be that individuals who have a pre-existing affinity for sacred texts could be counseled and trained toward better readings.

Successful de-radicalization should provide individuals with an alternative to violent worldviews. Revelation provides a potential replacement by which some readers could take their religious convictions with the utmost sincerity while redirecting behavioral outcomes. It is, in itself, a deepened worldview for John and for the seven churches. John’s vision culminates in the end of islands and the

⁵⁰ (Koester 2014, pp. 763–64).

⁵¹ See Koester, *Revelation*, pp. 3–25.

⁵² The cosmic geography of Revelation is consonant with those of Mesopotamia, the Levant, and to some extent, Egypt. (Wyatt 2001); Among the literatures of these regions, the sea is often a cosmological representative of the beginning and ends of the earth, and repeatedly serves as an entry point to the underworld. Wyatt, 98–120; Islands are spaces where the boundaries between the ancient trifold cosmology of heaven, earth, and the underworld are compressed and give way to one another. The sea is both a location of and participant in the cyclical cosmic battles that must take place to subdue chaos. In Revelation, the sea gives up the dead it has claimed, along with Death and Hades (Rev 20:13–14). For John, the sea may have been viewed as the defeated enemy of this cosmic battle, the diluvial foe that is finally dried up and made no more (4; 21:1).

⁵³ Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, p. 45.

establishment of a heavenly city on earth with open gates. My hope is that this exploratory reading can lead us toward realizing such things in our own times, even if only in part.

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