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Capitalizing on Religious Pluralism in U.S. Prison Ministry: Lessons from LSP Angola's Inmate Seminary

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Abstract: The renewed growth of immersive "faith-unit" programs operating inside U.S. maximum-security prisons has brought with it a heightened emphasis on the practice of religion in correctional settings. Modeled from a prototype Christian seminary planted inside Louisiana State Penitentiary Angola, newer programs utilize outside religious educators for the credentialing of inmates into work assignments on behalf of prisons. As resource-challenged wardens deploy religiously credentialed inmates for leading new forms of prison ministry inside state facilities, research has not kept pace with the rapid growth of programs. Based on previous research, this article offers a retrospective account of the establishment of "offender ministries" at the Angola prison seminary planted at Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1994. While correctional leaders are obliged to accommodate the diverse religious identities of prisoners, private sponsors of immersive religious programs must balance doctrinal fealty with religious pluralism. Drawing from fieldnotes and on-site interviews in previous research, lessons from the history of Angola's ecumenical prison seminary and "inmate ministry" programs are discussed while strengths and weaknesses are also highlighted.

Keywords: religious liberty; prison; rehabilitation

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> "*The other side of religious freedom is in fact a pacification of the pluralism of world-views that distribute burdens unequally. To date, only citizens committed to religious beliefs are required to split their identities, as it were, into their public and private elements.*" —J. Habermas (2004), Faith and Knowledge

1. American Religious Pluralism in U.S. Prisons

Perhaps one of the most illuminating venues to observe the dialogic power of religion in American public life is from within its sprawling prison system (Ammerman 2021). Insofar as prisons are state institutions and religion is regulated by the state, prisons offer a unique vantage point from which to gauge the practical and daily value of religion for citizens (Sullivan 2009, 2014; see former NFL Football Coach of the then Washington Redskins and now NASCAR promoter Joe Gibbs' Prison Ministry program (Gibbs 2022; see also: accessed on 17 August 2024 https://www.gameplanforlife.com/)). While inmates retain their right to religious practice, state prisons are constrained from promoting religious orthodoxy in meeting prisoners' religious needs. Due to fiscal and other constraints, however, religious volunteers have long held tremendous influence inside American prisons, due to their consistent willingness to volunteer on inmates' behalf (Hallett and Bookstaver 2018). When prison staff and volunteers are unable to meet all the diverse religious needs of prison populations, however, most prisoners remain underserved.

Because religious life in the U.S. is defined by the fact that there is no religious majority—that no single denominational affiliation encompasses a numeric majority of American citizens—America's persistent religious pluralism complicates the practice of

religion inside prisons (Herberg 1955; Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life 2019). While many U.S. citizens remain avowedly *anti-religious*, recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings affirm the centrality of religious identity for many citizens (Hurley 2020). To put it differently, religion is many things to many people and serves many agendas (Habermas 1983). Much as the desire to separate church from state has been the aspiration of secular modernists, the conceit that one must *exclude* religion from public life seems equally absurd to others. The fact of pluralism remains the hallmark feature of American religion.

2. Religion and the Rehabilitative Ideal

State prisons remain a central vantage point from which to observe the persistent, interwoven, and dialogic power of religious pluralism in American life (Sullivan 2009, 2014). As Rodney Stark famously demonstrated about religion in the United States: "Pluralism holds the key to the vitality of American religiousness as well as to the development of its religious civility" (Stark 2011, p. 367; Finke and Stark 2005). Melossi and Pavarini (1981), in *The Prison and the Factory: Origins of the Penitentiary System*, identified the penitentiary system as a place not of simple confinement, but as a venue for cultivating a monastic-like work ethic informed by religious devotion. Indeed, many observers have noted the functional similarity of the prison to other institutions of salvation and self-reinvention: influential arguments have been made concerning the overlaps and convergences between the modern prison and other "institutions such as the monastery, nunnery, reformatory, workhouse, asylum, hospital, factory, school, army barracks, and boot camps" (Scott 2013, pp. 301–24).

3. The Angola Prison Seminary

Established in 1995 after Congress revoked Pell Grant eligibility for convicted felons in the 1994 Crime Bill, a Christian seminary planted at Louisiana State Penitentiary Angola salvaged collegiate education in America's largest maximum-security prison at a time when it had been virtually eliminated. Determined to salvage education as a program resource for his prisoners, then Angola Warden Burl Cain explored the possibility of private seminaries working inside his state prison. Fearing an increase in violence as a result of the elimination of Pell's sought-after education programs, Cain reached out to officials from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) to inquire about whether the school might offer courses without cost as a gift to the prison. As Cain sheepishly put it, he hoped NOBTS faculty would be willing to come "on campus" at Angola to help transform the prison.

Despite initial reluctance and to the surprise of NOBTS administrators, the school's faculty found Angola inmates already well-steeped in Biblical literacy and actively engaged in religious worship services across the prison on a daily basis. Prisoners had long gathered in Angola's yards to sing Gospel music and to hear impromptu sermons delivered by volunteer "inmate pastors". In the aftermath of a 1975 federal takeover of Angola due to understaffing and unconstitutional levels of violence, religious education programs were identified by inmate leaders as among their most valued programs. With the state's permission, inmates were encouraged to expand their informal religious activities into formalized autonomous Baptist, Muslim, Pentecostal, Catholic, Methodist, Episcopal, and other worship associations–called "clubs" by prison officials and "churches" by prisoners. These "inmate churches" established their own polities and constitutions, elected their own pastoral leaders, and participated in a larger council of inmate social clubs at Angola. By the time of the Congressional revocation of Pell Grants in 1994, religious programming at Angola had become a recognized and formal mainstay of daily life at the prison. A five-year immersive study of the impact of the NOBTS seminary on Angola documented that religious affiliations of its inmates mirrored closely those of citizens in surrounding Louisiana. Table 1 below shows the breakdown of religious affiliation among Angola inmates in 2015.

Table 1. Religious affiliations of Angola inmates (2015).

Christianity, Non-denominational Protestant	37.9%
Catholic	27.4%
Pentecostal	15.7%
No religion	12.4%
Islam	4.7%
Judaism	0.6%
Buddhism	0.2%
Hinduism	0.1%
No response	1.0%

Inspired by the active religious lives of Angola prisoners, and by its own ethic of Christian service, at its own expense, NOBTS planted a full-scale "extension center" degree program inside Angola prison in 1995. To address concerns about religious favoritism and discrimination, NOBTS opened seminary enrollment to prisoners of all faiths (and of no faith). The school hired a fulltime on-site Director and four years later matriculated its first small cohort of "inmate ministry" graduates—incarcerated citizens holding diverse religious backgrounds but now with fully-accredited degrees in Christian ministry. NOBTS's decision to admit Catholic, Muslim, Pentecostal, and even non-believing prisoners for degrees in Christian ministry marked an important point of departure for NOBTS, which accepts only confirmed Baptists into its free-world degree program. By doing so, NOBTS became better able to serve a broader population of inmates and also the prison itself.

4. Religious Pluralism: Ecumenism as a Resource

The broad plurality of religious identities among inmates active in religious life at Angola powerfully shaped how NOBTS approached serving the prison. Because space limitations constrained religious worship on Sunday mornings, to accommodate Angola inmates' diverse religious preferences, open call-outs for services each weekday evening had become the norm, with many prisoners attending services seven days per week and across religious denominations. Importantly, because the school resided in a public prison, students were encouraged by the seminary to retain their own faiths, while informing their worldviews from the Baptist perspective. Muslim seminary students reflected upon Jesus as a prophet of God, while Catholic seminary students compared sacramental theology to penal substitutionary atonement (Hallett et al. 2017, pp. 167–97). Prisoners openly cross-worshiped, changed affiliations, and practiced across denominations at Angola. As one inmate put it: "I'm here for Jesus and I'll take Him wherever I can get Him".

Inspired by NOBTS's self-declared mission of service to the prison, Angola seminary graduates were encouraged to embrace their private religious identities while accepting the gift of Biblical education offered to them. Across evening worship services, Bible study and discussion groups formed between seminary students and general-population inmates. The NOBTS seminary presented itself as a resource for the prison, rather than as a source of indoctrination or conversion. Seminary director Dr. John Robson led the program for 20 years by the time of our interview (Hallett et al. 2017). His concerns had become more pastoral than academic:

> The education we provide is useful to the prison, but what I had to learn is that, unlike in the outside world, we first have to provide these men a grief ministry—to help them heal and get over their own pain and loss. . . .I tell them, 'The question is not Jesus where are you and how could God let this happen?' The question is 'Where are you? Where have you been? Jesus has been here the whole time.' . . .But I've seen how the love of Jesus can turn years of incarceration into easy math. We're just here to pick up the pieces. We're here to serve the

prison in the name of Jesus Christ. And just for the record, I'm not here to convert anyone. My cup is full (Hallett et al. 2017, p. 47)

As Catholic seminary student Kyle Hebert put it: "I was invited and approved to go to school . . . but not at all one time forced to become Baptist" (Hallett et al. 2017, pp. 61, 167–97). As shown in Table 2 below, a snapshot showing the denominationl affiliations ofactive seminary students in 2015 was as follows:

Table 2. Religious identification of Angola seminary students (2015).

Non-denominational, Charismatic	39.2%
Baptist	19.2%
Protestant (not further specified)	13.3%
Catholic	5.8%
Pentecostal	5.5%
Muslim	5.1%
Episcopalian	5.1%
Church of God in Christ	3.1%
Church of Christ	1.1%
None/Non-believer	2.6%

During their matriculation, seminary students initiated, as part of a required service project, new courses for teaching literacy as well as religious visitation programs across the dorms and cell blocks. After graduation, former students became leaders of new inmate "churches" while expanding non-religious service programs including 12-step groups, Death Row visitation, a chess club, and individual "watch" (safety monitoring) programs inside dorms. Seminary graduates also began delivering voluntary "spin-off" courses—versions of their previous NOBTS coursework—to peers outside the seminary. Using materials given to them for free by the seminary, other graduates voluntarily taught Henry Blackaby's *Experiencing God* course, a popular free-world Bible study required as a prerequisite for seminary students, but with enrollment, in this case, open to everyone (Blackaby et al. 2008). In short, in the aftermath of the congressional revocation of Pell Grants for convicted felons, a new faith-based public–private partnership was formed and began operating inside America's largest maximum-security prison. This partnership was formed out of both necessity and a profound measure of charity.

5. Inmate Peer Ministry

The NOBTS seminary inspired a new level of voluntarism among prisoners through its example of emphasizing servant leadership, which showed up later in hospice volunteers, new basic literacy courses, and new mentoring programs for prisoners in the dorms. Put another way, energized by the example of NOBTS serving inmates at no cost, Angola synergized development of a host of new inmate-led programming. Angola chief security warden DaveyDavey Kellone—a vocal opponent of the seminary initially—also began to notice something else happening: incidents of violence and self-harm were decreasing (Hallett et al. 2017).

Priding itself on the equivalency of its fully accredited degree program to that offered by NOBTS in the "free world", Angola began to attract the attention of journalists and outside visitors. Evangelists, politicians, religious volunteers, and corrections leaders from across the nation soon began visiting the Angola's inmate seminary—by invitation of prisoners. Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, visited in 1997—followed soon after by Franklin Graham (Finney 2018). Opening a robust new channel of philanthropy and social capital to the prison, visitors to the seminary were escorted by inmates. Visitors often brought with them both physical resources and connections to the outside world—unheard

of in a typical plantation prison. Visiting evangelists and student groups from Calvin College and Wheaton College, among others, also brought with them donated t-shirts, socks, work boots, and winter clothing as gifts to the entire prison. New letter-writing campaigns were developed between visitors and individual prisoners. In short, the bereft isolation of 1970s Angola rapidly began to dissipate through the introduction of the seminary. Visitors also brought with them a measure of respect and concern for the wellbeing of both prisoners and staff.

With most Angola correctional officers holding only a high school diploma, graduation from the seminary, perversely, put graduates in the position of being among the most educated personnel on site. Trained in pastoral counseling and conflict management, and often having unique private insights into the particular circumstances of individual prisoners, seminary graduates soon found an unexpected new workload—not in prison chapels but in dorms and cell blocks, in breaking up fights, sitting with peers after bad news, and counseling prisoners in the medical unit after suicide attempts. "Sidewalk counseling"—whereupon seminary grads would seize impromptu opportunities "to lift someone up on the walk or to just say a positive word" —became a specific avocation.

As America's largest maximum-security prison, holding over 6300 inmates, Angola was also perhaps its toughest: 90% of Angola inmates died at the prison serving natural life sentences. It was also among the most understaffed. Staff turnover in security ranks was high, while the state chaplaincy had also been recently downsized and privatized through part-time contracts. After security warden Davey Kellone increasingly noticed seminary graduates consoling peers in distress—and observing privately that they often did so more effectively than his own staff—he devised a new inmate trustee program: Angola's unique "Offender Minister" program. Stated Kellone: "I soon had to admit that the seminary students were often far more effective than me sending over a chaplain or security officer. And it's not just their training. It's also a level of access they have that I don't; it's those guys helping each other as equals. There's a mutual respect and trust there that I can't bring to the situation. I thought maybe we could use that" (Program Warden Richard Peabody 2015).

Starting in 1999, Kellone began officially deploying seminary graduates as part of his new "Offender Minister" program across the entire prison. "oOffender Ministers" (sometimes called "inmate ministers") were placed in each dorm with specific work assignments to check in on prisoners, keeping logs turned in to the head chaplain's office. Kellone devised the inmate ministry program to be used strictly for helping inmates and not for discipline—to "just check on people, to just talk to them, ask them how they're doing, what they need. That's it. Nothing disciplinary. And no snitching—I don't want any of them telling me anything like that and I'm not going to ask them for that. In fact, if they do snitch -they're fired".

Faced with profound understaffing, yet having the new resource of trained counselors who had earned trustee status in his prison, Kellone put many of them to work across the facility. While carefully vetted and closely monitored, Angola's seminary grads were dubbed "oOffender Ministers" and quickly became "essentially a part of the staff," according to Program Warden Richard Peabody (private interview). All Angola's oOffender Ministers were already inmate trustees as a condition of acceptance into the seminary. Additional requirements were:

1. Be a graduate of the NOBTS degree program in Christian ministry;
2. Have recommendation of the Chaplain's Department;
3. Have recommendation of at least two ranking security officers;
4. Have recommendation of an Inmate Church pastor;
5. As an exception, "Inmate Church" leaders ("Religious Club Pastors") who had not graduated from the NOBTS program but with all of the above and a recommendation from Warden Cain could also serve as offender Ministers.

In order to traverse the prison, Kellone issued Offender Ministers official state identification cards and instructed his staff to allow for their conducting rounds. As credentialed

"Offender Ministers" with official state ID cards, Offender Ministers gained authorization to traverse the prison's cell blocks, Death Row, and all the "out-camps" of the prison. Dispersed across Angola's five prison complexes, Offender Ministers were provided with office space for private counseling and held regular private staff meetings with Warden Cain. As oOffender Ministers repeatedly emphasized: "Listen, I'm not here to convert anybody. I'm just trying to help someone self-identify" (Hallett et al. 2017, p. 47). Finally, drawing upon decades of research into the effectiveness of drug treatment counselors who themselves were former addicts, the oOffender Ministers themselves, derived satisfaction from their service to others:

> In actuality you're like an inmate chaplain. You know, that's the responsibility you have. You deliver death messages, you do counseling, you set the schedules, you host outside ministries that come in. You make rounds. You know, there's a lot more to do than I thought. There's a lot of responsibilities. But I tell you I can't say anything bad about my religious responsibilities. I thank God for them. It's been a life changing experience for me (Hallett et al. 2017, p. 47).

Multiple independent data sources from the Louisiana Department of Corrections and internal data from Angola itself confirmed that violence and self-harm fell consistently over 20 straight years after establishment of the Offender Minister program (Jang et al. 2018). While not the only security program active at the prison, both staff and inmates independently stressed the importance of Angola's re-energized religious culture as "the central organizing venue for turning this place around" (Program Warden Richard Peabody 2015). Offender Ministers were given office space and official state identification cards, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Offender Minister state ID and Offender Ministry offices, Camp C, Angola.

6. Peer Mentoring, Inmate Ministry, and the Modern Crisis of Prisons

Since the 1950s, criminologists have acknowledged the benefits of involving formerly incarcerated individuals as practitioners in the rehabilitation of offenders (Cressey 1955). Programs with a focus on faith and addiction recovery have particularly leveraged these peer-based "wounded healers" as critical resources in their rehabilitative efforts (LeBel et al. 2015). Former addicts, for example, are often seen as the most effective drug counselors, not because of formal academic qualifications, but due to their "lived experience" in overcoming addiction, which fosters authenticity and relatability (LeBel et al. 2015).

One of the most compelling findings about "peer mentoring" is its dual benefits: it significantly impacts both those receiving guidance and those providing it (Maruna 2001, 2017; Hinde and White 2019; LeBel et al. 2015). In 12-step programs, the act of helping others is frequently cited as a cornerstone of personal recovery (Hallett and McCoy 2015). Although peer-led initiatives are not a comprehensive solution to the challenges within the prison system, expanding offender-led religious programs can enrich the limited rehabilitative options available to incarcerated individuals (Johnson et al. 2022). Support from peers who have navigated similar struggles can offer hope to those who feel their situations are bleak. As noted, "lived experience not only communicates that peer mentors understand the hardships of navigating the criminal justice system, but also signals their proven ability to transcend its challenges" (Quinn and Goodman 2023).

7. Getting to Scale: The Scope of U.S. Inmate Peer Ministry

Importantly, the position of "offender minister" at Angola predates the NOBTS seminary, as it had long been practiced by correctional staff to rely upon the prison's unique religious culture for serving inmates in crisis. Inmate peer ministers are noted by staff to be particularly effective during specific times of distress for inmates: upon notification of death of a loved one outside the prison, upon first entry into the prison, after family visits, and during the "last rites" process for inmates on death row.

At present 29 states have active inmate peer ministry programs in advanced development or in full operation. These programs deploy privately-funded religious educational institutions inside prisons for the purpose of training inmates to serve in an explicitly religious capacity in multiple types of inmate peer ministry, with matriculated graduates carrying out prison work assignments ranging from process counseling and leading congregational religious worship and small group exercises, to passively acting as "agents of God" in all facets of prison life.

While inmates are provided the education they receive for free, both program sponsors and prison administrators frequently prioritize recruiting inmates with life sentences "for greater return on investment". In return for their education, inmates are expected to "give back to the prison", in what many inmate peer ministers describe as a very cathartic "24–7/365 assignment" in which they are "Always on duty for Jesus." In the nation's largest such program, inmate peer ministry in Texas has expanded not just to producing inmate peer ministers serving one host institution, but to sending out "inmate field ministers" across the entire Texas prison system. At this writing, 199 matriculated inmate field ministers have been credentialed through the Heart of Texas Foundation College of Ministry and work in direct contact with inmates in 32 Texas prisons (Johnson et al. 2022; Duwe et al. 2015).

In sum, today the 30-year educational vacuum produced by the 1994 Pell Grant revocation has produced a novel and growing experiment of religious penal voluntarism in American maximum-security prisons. Made possible by what Malcolm Feeley calls "penal entrepreneurship," volunteers working in cooperation with prison administrators, Christian educators sponsoring collegiate degree programs inside U.S. prisons, have hybridized maximum-security prisons (Feeley 2017). With private fundraising efforts, political co-sponsors, and partnering non-profit organizations, a new and vibrant form of pluralistic prison ministry has emerged (Johnson et al. 2022). Due to resource constraints and the

broad diversity of religious faiths that may be held by prisoners in custody, the practice of maintaining religious pluralism in prisons is a constant challenge.

8. Treatment of Religious Minorities and Burl Cain Controversies

Some critics of the Angola prison seminary point to legitimate questions regarding the religious liberty of inmates at the prison and Warden Burl Cain's overt promotion of Christianity over other religions (see Childs 2013). As reported in my research on Angola, Muslim inmates often felt aggrieved in terms of unequal access to resources such as sacred texts, prayer rugs, and equivalent levels of religious instruction. In order to accommodate Muslim inmates, repeated efforts were made to hire and retain Imams as public chaplains at the prison. Despite repeated efforts, Muslim chaplains would be retained at the prison, only to take better-paying jobs elsewhere (see Hallett et al. 2017, pp. 184–88). Part of the challenge facing Angola and many American prisons, is that they are located in remote areas far removed from urban centers. As a result, serving the diverse needs of prisoners who practice minority faiths is a constant challenge (see Beckford 2013).

As for the controversies surrounding Warden Cain, who upon his departure from Angola had been accused of improper use of state funds, subsequent investigations revealed no improper dealings on the part of Cain—who referenced the allegations as unfounded and caused by his open speculation of running for Governor of the state of Louisiana (Stole 2020). After his retirement from Angola, Cain was selected to serve as Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections. Under Cain's tenure as Commissioner, the notorious prison at Parchman Farm (Mississippi State Penitentiary) achieved successful reaccreditation from the American Correctional Association after nearly a decade of having lost it before his arrival (MDOC 2023). Finally, as Cain himself explains, his outreach to religious volunteers to serve Angola came only after the federal government took resources from his prison by revoking Pell Grant eligibility for convicted felons in 1994. This move, approved by prominent Democrats such as Joe Biden and Bill Clinton, removed a key resource for helping assure calm in U.S. prisons—collegiate education courses (Duwe and Clark 2014).

9. Strengths and Weaknesses of Programs Based on the "Angola Model"

"Prison seminaries" are educational programs located within correctional facilities that provide theological training to inmates. These programs can vary in their structure and offerings but generally aim to provide a religious education that inmates can use for personal development or to prepare for ministry roles either inside or outside of prison after their release. Sectarian training of inmates through immersive programs in public prisons raises a number of ethical, legal, and logistical challenges, only some of which have been addressed by research.

Strengths

1. **Rehabilitation and Moral Development:** Prison seminaries often focus on moral and spiritual education, which can aid in the personal growth and rehabilitation of inmates. Participants claim to develop a stronger sense of ethics and purpose, which is crucial for successful reintegration into society.
2. **Reduction in Recidivism:** Studies have suggested that educational programs, including religious education, can lower recidivism rates. Inmates who engage in meaningful activities and education are less likely to reoffend upon release. Longitudinal research on the experiences of prison seminary graduates, however, has yet to be conducted.
3. **Improved Prison Environment:** Prison seminary programs can contribute to a more positive and stable environment within prisons. While programming in general has been shown to be of great benefit for prisoners, religious education provides opportunities for critical self-reflection and identity reconstruction—two elements thought to be associated with long-term desistance.

4. **Support Network:** Prison seminaries help build strong fellowship communities among prisoners that facilitates religious coping. Emotional and spiritual support often lacking in prison environments can render prisoners more open to receiving help.
5. **Post-Release Opportunities:** Through religious programs, prisoners are often able to connect with outside volunteers, increasing their social capital for the experience of prisoner reentry. While social capital is often utterly decimated by criminal convictions, religious programming offers unique opportunities for its development.

Weaknesses

1. **Accountability and Inclusivity:** Prison seminary programs may be available only in select prisons and might exclude inmates based on their religious beliefs or lack thereof, potentially leading to feelings of segregation or discrimination. Religious education programs have been criticized for displacing resources and space for secular education and other enrichment programs.
2. **Funding and Resources:** Prison seminaries require robust funding and resources that demand sophisticated operations to maintain and develop. In some settings, organizations able to raise necessary funds may come to dominate religious education in correctional settings, raising concerns about coerciveness and religious liberty.
3. **Religious Coercion:** The prospect of inmate ministry remains untested in terms of its constitutionality. While previous programs have been shut down for monopolizing space and doctrine, prison-supported religious credentialing may well constitute establishment of religion by the state. Prison credentialed "ministry" by inmates may well raise concerns about power imbalances among inmates as well, particularly when controlled by only a small number of stakeholders.
4. **Impact Measurement:** Many factors influence outcomes after release, and long-term studies of prison seminary graduates have yet to be conducted. The claim that "prison seminaries reduce recidivism" remains purely anecdotal at this point.
5. **Overemphasis on Conversion:** Some critics argue that prison-based religious education programs have been allowed to shift their focus to religious conversion rather than religious education. In such instances, the line between church and state is arguably blurred.

10. Conclusions: Capitalizing on Religious Pluralism in Prison Ministry

> *To seriously shrink the prison population, however, conservatives will have to accept the construction of alternative government structures; liberals will have to accept that these will remain more paternalistic than they might like.* (Dagan and Teles 2014)

American prisons today are in great crisis. The human beings serving time in American prisons frequently report what amounts to literal torture and dehumanization. Over the past many years, we have spent a significant amount of time inside some of America's largest and toughest prisons, in most cases having unrestricted access to prisoners. We have learned that, in no small part due to budget constraints imposed by overuse of incarceration, prison officials find it nearly impossible to adequately care for the citizens in their care—despite a deep and genuine desire to do so. In these understaffed and challenged environments, correctional authorities are now experimenting with creative new public–private partnerships like that started by Warden Burl Cain at Angola and described above. As noted throughout this paper, these programs are the tip of the iceberg in terms of religious voluntarism in correctional settings (Tomczak 2016).

Unfortunately, academics are notoriously skeptical about religion, particularly when mixed in with governmental functions like incarceration. Though religion has always been a feature of prisons, its precise role in incarceration remains a contested topic. When implemented properly, however, we believe programs run by religious volunteers and inmates themselves can accomplish many of the goals highlighted by prison reformers. While some academics have argued that religion in prison works to obscure larger social disparities that drive mass incarceration, we show how these programs actually reverse them. More importantly, we show how these programs deliver immediate face-to-face

resources for prisoners while rendering prisons themselves more transparent, "reinventive", and less punitive. Overall, prison religious education programs like Angola's can play a significant role in the rehabilitation of inmates by fostering spiritual growth and community-building, though they also face challenges related to inclusivity and the balance of religious and secular interests within the correctional system (Hallett 2023a, pp. 473–94; Duwe et al. 2023). The Offender Ministers at Angola are a resource for inmates and correctional staff alike, some of whom have become fulltime chaplains at other state prisons after release (Hallett 2023b; Johnson et al. 2022).

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