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**Book review: Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education  
and Healing by Stern, K.**

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Stern, K. (2015) *Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education, and Healing*, London: Routledge

Reviewed by Sacha Darke, University of Westminster, for the Prison Service Journal

In this distinctive and provocative text, Kaia Stern sets out to "dispel three myths" about prisons in America: that "people in prison are not worthy of human rights", that "people who work in prison are enemies of prison reform", and that "our crisis of mass imprisonment is not everyone's problem and everyone's responsibility to change" (p.12). Concerning the latter of these two points, we are told, for example, that a third of Americans both have family members that have been imprisoned and have worked in law enforcement. It soon becomes apparent that the author is most interested in the denial of human rights to prisoners. Of central importance to the book is the historical dominance of protestant religious orthodoxy. Rather than reject religion as a path to a just penal system, however, Stern invokes Barack Obama's controversial 2006 call for liberal progressives to recognise the existence of common values, and embrace the potential that less conservative religious beliefs hold for spurring positive social change.<sup>1</sup> Stern explains that her underlying purpose in writing the book is to draw the religious practices of mercy, love and forgiveness to the attention of secular prison reformers. Religion, she emphasises, is a paradox, that "simultaneously saves and damns, heals and harms, frees and yokes" (p.2).

Stern grounds her critique in twenty years experience teaching theological higher education courses in 12 prisons, and over 400 pages of transcripts from 15 life history interviews with six former prisoner graduates of the Master of Professional Studies in Ministry programme at Sing Sing Prison, New York. Right from the outset, Stern locates her research within a critical criminological framework that focuses on exposing and challenging the injustices and counterproductive nature of imprisonment through the narratives and standpoints of prisoners. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their early life experiences, their experiences of studying theological higher education in prison, and how their wider prison experiences resonated with the official aim of the correctional department to be safe, stable and humane. The interviews lasted several hours and were otherwise largely unstructured. Stern's experience of teaching in prison were useful to the extent that it facilitated her ability to empathise and communicate with her research participants. Through reciprocally reflecting on her own 'inside' knowledge of prison in addition to that of the interviewees, Stern adds that she was also in the rare position of being able to "co-theorize" (p.7) and "co-create" (p.8) new visions of criminal justice with her research participants.

From this methodological and epistemological position, the first chapters of *Voices from American Prisons* explore the historical role played by religion in: the consolidation of prison as a principle means of dealing with social problems; the shifting priorities given to rehabilitation but more often isolation and retribution as the principle aims of punishment; and the creation of "an institutionalized apartheid" (p.19), two thirds populated, for example, by people that earned less than \$2000 dollars in the year before they were imprisoned. We learn that traditional religious ideology has predominated on the whole, and with it the belief that wrongs can be righted and wounds healed through demonising offenders, and that individuals should be held personally responsible for their troubles and for their redemption.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://obamaspeeches.com/081-Call-to-Renewal-Keynote-Address-Obama-Speech.htm>, cited on p.2. Accessed 11 July, 2016.

At the same time, however, religious ideology "also contains the seeds of transformative possibility" (p.50). In place of the Augustinian notions of original sin and Calvinistic notions of predestination and total depravity that have come to dominate the American penal system, Stern encourages prison reformers to learn from the Abrahamic scriptures, which "taught us through prophetic example to align ourselves with the isolated and condemned" (p.49). The current tragic state of American prisons, Stern concludes, is a crisis of religion as much as human rights.

The remainder of the book is dedicated to the voices of the six interviewees themselves. Following an overview of her interviewees' experiences of imprisonment at Sing Sing and other American prisons, the author focuses on the means by which the Master of Professional Studies in Ministry programme helped them to survive psychologically. Throughout the text, Stern quotes extensively from the former prisoners' accounts of pain and struggle, the first of which she organises along the classic themes of dehumanization, isolation and social death that students of American prisons will already be well acquainted. Where the book is likely to stand out most for Stern's targeted secular audience is in the themes she draws from her interviewees' accounts of overcoming the pains of imprisonment. Principle of these are the themes of peace, personal integrity and service. The results of the programme cited in the book are certainly impressive. Of the 159 graduates released since the programme started in 1982, just 18 had returned to prison.

Voices from American Prisons should appeal to all researchers and prison practitioners interested in learning about the historical and contemporary influences of religion on prison and resistance to prison in the United States. It should particularly appeal to scholars interested in developing inside perspectives and collaborative ethnography, although some like the current author will wish the book had utilised the former prisoner voices to develop as much as illustrate existing theories. Voices from American Prisons will also particularly interest university teachers, again including the current author, that are involved in developing higher education courses in prison. In this case, some readers may question the general lack of attention that Stern gives to the benefits of prison higher education in itself until the concluding chapter. Had Stern's broader analysis of prison higher education come earlier in the book, the book's intended audience might have gained a stronger understanding of the specific benefits of religious education. Finally, some prison reformers will be left questioning why the book did not move beyond the matter of (religious) education as a path to transforming people's reactions to the pains of imprisonment onto transforming prison conditions themselves.