

The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America

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Review

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Graber, Jennifer *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3457-2

Digger Deeper to Examine Antebellum Prisons

Like many Americans, Jennifer Graber is deeply disturbed by the current state of America's prisons. She notes that there are at present two million Americans incarcerated and contends that our prisons now have a "decidedly retributive tone" to them (1). In this informative and well-written work, Graber, a professor at the College of Wooster, examines the early history of American prisons to see how and why Americans lost interest in reforming criminals and instead sought to punish them. As a religious historian, Graber is particularly interested in the role Protestant ministers and laymen played in the first prisons.

Graber chooses to focus on three prisons in New York: Newgate, which operated in Greenwich Village from 1796-1828; Auburn, and Sing Sing, which were established in upstate New York in 1816 and 1828 respectively. She notes that, in the colonial era, lawbreakers were not normally incarcerated. They might be put in stocks for a specified period, subjected to a public whipping, or sent to the gallows if the crime was serious enough. Reform-minded Quakers believed that it would be better for the criminal to be housed in a facility away from the public eye. Newgate Prison was designed by a Quaker and included gardens and a chapel and common rooms where the inmates would sleep. The Quaker officials refused to impose corporal punishment on the inmates and were confident that the prisoners would respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and become better Christians.

Within a few years, it was clear to most observers that Newgate was not succeeding. Inmates were not separated according to their crimes so hardened criminals could exert a corrupting influence on inmates who had committed trifling offenses. The new prison at Auburn was intended to correct some of the

mistakes made at Newgate. At Auburn, inmates would be classified according to the offenses they committed and alcohol was banned from the premises. During the day, prisoners would work together in silence on goods that could make money for the jail. At night the prisoners were put in individual cells to keep them from conspiring with one another. Inmates who broke the rules would be subject to the lash.

Like Newgate, Auburn emphasized the role of religion. Its chaplains were evangelical Protestants who approved of its stern program. Ministers such as the Baptist John Stanford subscribed to a "theology of redemptive suffering" (58). Stanford believed that when prisoners experienced pain and hardship, they would be more likely to be receptive to God's grace and more willing to commit themselves to Christ.

By the late 1820s, plans were underway for Sing Sing prison in Ossining. The new facility was structured like Auburn with individual cells and group workrooms; however, its wardens were much tougher on the prisoners. They were interested in maintaining order and making a profit and were skeptical about the prospects of inmate reformation. Graber notes that inmates had to walk in lockstep and were not given any utensils for their meals.

When the chaplain protested to the Board of Prison Inspectors about conditions in the facility, the warden, Elam Lynds, attacked him and threw him out of the jail. Sing Sing then remained without a resident chaplain for a year. Conditions finally started to improve in the late 1830s when William Seward, a reform-minded Whig, was elected Governor of New York. Seward was antislavery and pro-temperance and was more sympathetic to the Protestant ministers' ideas about inmate reformation than were the Democrats. Seward fired the warden, replacing him with a man who restricted the use of corporal punishment and promoted Sabbath school programs for the inmates.

By the early 1840s, the more secular-minded Democrats were back in power in New York. The Democrats promptly rehired the hard-nosed Lynds as warden. Under Lynds, floggings became much more commonplace and inmates were no longer allowed to receive visits or letters from friends or relatives. While the chaplain, a Methodist named John Luckey, protested the harsher policies, his complaints were to no avail. However, a newly-established reform organization, the New York Prison Association (NYPA) was more effective. Led by a judge, the NYPA argued that prisons should seek to reform prisoners so that they would

be able to become law-abiding citizens after their terms were completed. The NYPA saw a need for chaplains, but felt that the ministers should teach inmates about their rights and responsibilities as American citizens. The NYPA was not as concerned with bringing the prisoners to faith in Christ.

Although the NYPA leaders maintained a high profile at the statehouse in Albany, their influence was short-lived. By the 1850s, New York's prisons were badly overcrowded. Many of the inmates were impoverished immigrants who had recently arrived from Ireland and Germany. With crime of all sorts rising—especially in New York City—the state's politicians lost interest in rehabilitating inmates. By this time, Graber claims that the prisons had become “hell on earth” (166). While ministers continued to labor in them, they had few inmate conversions to report.

After the Civil War ended and the horrors of the Confederates' Andersonville prison were revealed, there were calls to reform the nation's prisons. These calls were followed by sporadic appeals over the following decades to improve conditions in the jails and try to rehabilitate prisoners. Graber does not think that any of these efforts had a significant impact. In her view, prisons have remained severe, unforgiving places. While floggings are no longer permitted, prisoners can still be abused by other means such as being placed in solitary confinement for long periods.

Graber believes that at least some of the blame for the sorry state of America's prisons should fall on the Protestant ministers. While admitting that the chaplains pressed for better conditions for the prisoners, she concludes that they “contributed to the prison's development in all its cruelty. They advocated an institution that enclosed people against their will, forced them to labor, separated them from all human comforts, and deprived them of every freedom” (176). It is no doubt the case that some ministers should have spoken out more forcefully about the evils they witnessed; however, most of the criticism should surely be directed at the cruel wardens and their Democratic Party patrons who sought to punish the inmates and profit off of their labor.

There are other gaps as well. Graber makes several references to the increasing number of immigrants populating New York's jails. Were those who were Catholic attended to by priests? Certainly John Hughes, the combative Irish-born archbishop of New York, would not have wanted Catholic inmates to be visited by evangelical clergy. It would also have been interesting to hear

about how race affected the treatment prisoners received. One of Graber's illustrations is of a black inmate being subjected to an ice-cold "shower-bath." Were African American prisoners more likely than whites to suffer abuse at the hands of their jailers?

These difficulties notwithstanding, Graber should be commended for the many insights that she has provided into the development of New York's prisons and the ambivalent part played in them by Protestant reformers. Contemporary advocates of prison reform will no doubt be interested in learning that there was a time when the prison was seen as a place to rehabilitate offenders. Religiously-inspired reformers can learn much from Graber's book as well. They will see how difficult it can be for believers to bring their values to bear in a pluralistic society such as America.

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