

# ‘You’re not Serving Time, You’re Serving Christ’: Protestant Religion and Discourses of Responsibilization in a Women’s Prison

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Criminologists are increasingly concerned with how incarcerated persons navigate dominant carceral discourses. Insights from narrative criminology reveal that individuals draw on a variety of available discursive resources to adopt, subvert or negotiate dominant messages around what it means to be punished. This article draws on yearlong ethnographic observations inside one US state women’s prison to examine whether and how religion matters for responsabilization discourses promoted by state actors. Examining a case study of Protestant prison activities, I find that religious discourses served dual purposes in light of responsabilization. Interpretively, by describing prison as part of God’s plan, they offered a meaningful counterpoint that mitigated punitive discourses from prison officials. In practice, responsabilization discourses, filtered through the coercive carceral context, re-emerged through a normative religious lens with regard to prison rules and state authority. Considered at the intersection of race, class and gender, this article interrogates how women may draw on discourses from competing institutions such as religion in constructing self-narratives and enacting responsabilization, and how this matters for state control.

**Key Words:** prison, religion, incarcerated women, responsabilization discourses, neoliberal punishment

## INTRODUCTION

Discourses in the contemporary carceral landscape reflect dominant narratives around who ‘should’ be punished, and how. Carceral discourses not only reflect current correctional practices (Goodman *et al.* 2017) but also shape justice-involved individuals’ self-narratives (Stevens 2012; Fleetwood 2014). In today’s US correctional facilities, discourses describe incarcerated persons as ‘dangerous’ (Irwin 2005) or pathologically ‘flawed’ (McCorkel 2013), without acknowledging the structural inequalities that lead to surveillance or criminalized activity in the first place (Garland 2001; Stuart 2016). Amidst a growing reliance on ‘risk assessment’ tools that rely on individualistic, neoliberal logics of responsabilization (Harcourt 2007; Phelps 2018), state actors evaluate whether a person is capable of sufficient transformation through a ‘positive attitude’ and ‘normalizing interventions’ (Hannah-Moffat 2005: 43; see also Werth

2017). To be punished in the ‘right’ way, according to responsabilization discourses, is to ‘perform a flagellant self’ (Warr 2020: 36) and narrate accountability for one’s actions.

Criminologists have urged careful consideration of the processes by which incarcerated individuals adopt, reject or negotiate these dominant discourses in their self-narratives and future actions (Crewe 2009; Ugelvik 2014). People construct narratives by culling a wide array of available discourses from culture, institutions, organizations and peers (Loseke 2007; Presser and Sandberg 2014). Religion is one such discursive source that has been understudied, particularly amongst women in prison. Research primarily on men has begun to examine how religious discourses support or subvert carceral control (Armstrong 2016; Werth 2016; Erzen 2017; Johnson 2017). In this article, I explore whether and how religion matters for responsabilization discourses promoted by state actors. Drawing on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork inside one US state women’s prison, I examine a case study of evangelical and charismatic Protestant Christian activities. I find that religious narratives served dual purposes in light of responsabilization discourses. Interpretively, by describing prison as part of God’s plan, they offered a meaningful counterpoint that mitigated punitive discourses from prison officials. In practice, responsabilization discourses, filtered through the coercive carceral context, re-emerged through a normative religious lens with regard to prison rules and state authority. Considered at the intersection of race, class and gender, this article interrogates how women may draw on discourses from competing institutions such as religion in constructing self-narratives and enacting responsabilization, and how this matters for state control.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Contemporary carceral discourses on responsabilization

Discursive carceral landscapes—or ideas about what punishment ‘means’ or ‘achieves’—adapt to the political, economic and social interests that drive changing correctional practices (Goodman *et al.* 2017). Previously, during the 1970s and 1980s, US prison boom, with its surge in arrests and convictions of socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals—disproportionately people of colour—the American public clung to fear-driven discourses of a ‘new dangerous class’ (Irwin 2005; see also Feeley and Simon 1992) in the name of a public safety zeitgeist. Carceral discourses followed suit, shifting away from rehabilitation towards retribution (Garland 2001). US prison officials described their task as controlling blameworthy ‘criminals’ who deserve punishment (Simon 1993). Today, expanding carceral control across surveilling institutions (Kaufman *et al.* 2019) and increased use of ‘risk assessment’ tools (Harcourt 2007; Phelps 2018) has led to prevalent ‘responsibilization’ discourses that emphasize neoliberal rehabilitation. Individuals are assessed on their ability to transform themselves into responsible, law-abiding citizens through bootstraps accountability (Lynn 2019). Given the scientific sheen of risk assessment tools, those who become incarcerated are viewed as the most ‘dangerous’ (Werth 2017) or, in some cases, the ‘worst of the worst’ (Rhodes 2004). Prisoners are encouraged to see themselves as ‘flawed’ (McCorkel 2013; Calavita and Jenness 2015) and to ‘perform a flagellant self’ (Warr 2020: 36). Even rehabilitative correctional programmes are tinged with critiques of offenders as weak or damaged (e.g. Schept 2015; McKim 2017).

Because the state does not merely punish the crime, but also the person herself (Foucault 1981/1994), dominant discourses seek to govern individuals’ self-narratives (Stevens 2012). After all, self-narratives are part and parcel of the construction and maintenance of power, since ‘the production of a subject ... is one means of its regulation’ (Butler 1993: 224n6). The implications are particularly acute amongst women in prison, where state actors rely on discourses of paternalism and deservingness (Belknap 2010; Haney 2010; Lempert 2016), while drawing on stereotypes around race and ethnicity (Diaz-Cotto 1996; McCorkel 2013) without

accounting for gendered pathways to incarceration (Crewe *et al.* 2017). Dominant discourses require justice-involved individuals to account for their criminalized activity by telling the 'right story' (Fleetwood 2014), leading to an 'empowerment' paradox in which women are asked to take responsibility for their crime while leaning into feminine submissiveness (Bosworth 1999; Hannah-Moffat 2000). There is a range of responses to responsibilization discourses. Some feel obliged to perform state discourses (Crewe 2009; McCorkel 2013; Warr 2020). Others seem to adopt these self-narratives wholeheartedly, describing prison as a 'reinventive institution' (Crewe and Ievins 2019), a site for growth (Van Ginneken 2016) or a 'turning point' away from offending (Maruna 2001). Importantly, neither acquiescence, acceptance, nor rejection suggests greater or lesser agency: rather, they reflect the trenchant power of carceral narratives, as 'all acts of subversion are a product of the terms of violence that they seek to oppose' (Mahmood 2005: 21). Across this range of responses, we see how responsibilization discourses endeavour to shape self-narratives.

Additionally, dominant discourses have implications for adherence to prison authority. They seek 'not so much to make prisoners ... merely obedient but to inculcate in them a kind of enthusiastic engagement with the terms of the regime' (Crewe 2009: 10). However, there is clear variation in the extent to which incarcerated individuals adopt, resist or subvert these normative responsibilization narratives when it comes to behaviour (Crewe 2009; Ugelvik 2014; Rubin 2015). Some individuals narrate personal responsibility to avoid 'the mix' of breaking prison rules (Owen 1998). Others reject responsibilization but nevertheless act in 'surface compliance' (Robinson and McNeill 2008) or 'dull compulsion' (Carrabine 2004), citing the inevitability of rules in a coercive environment. Still others embrace responsibilization narratives as a deeply felt component of their rehabilitation (Crewe 2009; Goodman 2012), while some may adapt responsibilization to their 'reformed subjectivity' based on an inner desire to desist (Werth 2011). Justice-involved individuals are active participants in their narrative construction, yet despite the range of possible responses, they must do so within a constraining paradigm that offers little choice but to contend with dominant discourses and the authority of the penal regime.

However, top-down state discourses are not to sole purveyor of self-narratives in prison. Our understanding is incomplete without analysis of competing institutional discourses (Loseke 2007; Presser and Sandberg 2014). Available narratives lay a foundation for the 'conditions of possibility' (Foucault 1977) by which people make sense of their lives as they relate to dominant organizations (Loseke 2007; Gubrium and Holstein 2008). Indeed, competing discourses can be employed to reject dominant narratives proffered by correctional officials (Ugelvik 2014) or can be employed to reinforce them and, by extension, reproduce penal power (Werth 2016). The current article focuses on a case study of religion in a US women's prison to examine how incarcerated women draw on discursive resources from one available institution—that of Protestant Christianity—to navigate prevalent responsibilization discourses. These findings add to our understanding of how justice-connected institutions can promulgate discourses that challenge or support dominant carceral discourses.

### Religious discourses in the prison context

The comparatively limited research on religious discourses in US prisons is a striking oversight given the central role of religion in the lives of many who become incarcerated. Nearly 95 per cent of US Americans believe in God (Froese and Bader 2010). Women—Black women and socioeconomically disadvantaged in particular—are especially devout (Sullivan 2012; Schnabel 2015). Moreover, the institutions of religion and prison have been intertwined for centuries (Skotnicki 2000), and religious beliefs have long informed punishment practices (Applegate *et al.* 2000). Antebellum American prison officials used the Protestant ideology of redemption

through physical suffering to justify corporal punishment (Graber 2011). Quaker principles inspired the construction of Eastern State Penitentiary, where prisoners were expected to repent in isolation with nothing but a Bible to read (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1833/1964). Early 19th-century Canadian reformers sought moral regulation over incarcerated women through Christian ideology around motherhood (Hannah-Moffat 2001). Even the ‘panopticon’ likens control through constant unverifiable surveillance to the watchful eye of God (Bentham 1843/1995).

Today’s penal facilities are putatively divorced from their religious origins, no longer concerned with prisoners’ spiritual transformation (Simon 2010). Nevertheless, religion remains central to the experience of imprisonment, and may therefore be relevant for carceral discourses. At the turn of the century, a decline in state funding for secular activities led faith-based activities to become one of the few available to all prisoners (Erzen 2017). The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act 2012 mandated religious freedom for US inmates (42 U.S.C. § 2000cc), with religion defined by top-down categories of affiliation. Anyone in the general population is ensured the constitutional right to practice religion, yielding a symbiotic administrative relationship between the state and religious institutions (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Sullivan 2009; Becci and Dubler 2017).

Existing research on religion in prison grapples with its ‘double function’ as a liberating and suppressing force (DuBois 1903/2003). One line of scholarship highlights its oppositional function to punitive state discourses. As Jacobs (1976) asserted, ‘Unconventional religions [such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Nation of Islam] ... have achieved considerable success in providing an ideological shield to the assaults on self conceptions that attend imprisonment’ (478), enabling those in prison to ‘reject [their] rejectors’. Indeed, discourses from the Nation of Islam promoting resistance against structural racism are well documented (Colley 2014). There is a consensus that religion affords moral self-worth (Bosworth 1999; Dubler 2013) and a sense of hope and greater purpose in prison (Maruna *et al.* 2006; Aday *et al.* 2014; Kerley 2014). Studies on US faith-based prison initiatives suggest a redemptive function, contrasting punitive state meanings (Johnson 2011; Erzen 2017). In Brazil, Pentecostalism contrasts state discourses around incarcerated men’s moral worth (Johnson 2017). In the United States, Protestant discourses offer comfort for women facing the strains of motherhood (Cunningham Stringer 2009) and depression (Dye *et al.* 2014) behind bars. Even Goffman (1961/2007) prescribed religion as an antidote to prison ideology: ‘Strong religious and political convictions may also serve perhaps to immunize the true believer against the assaults of a total institution’ (66). Broadly, these studies suggest religion challenges punitive prison discourses through redemption (Erzen 2017).

A countervailing line of scholarship examines religion’s potential to support carceral discourses. Recall Marx’s (1844) interpretation of religion as an ‘opiate’, or Frazier’s (1963/1974) theory that religion’s otherworldly orientation may suppress resistance. Recent findings suggest that conservative religious beliefs, moderated by race, are associated with support for hegemonic values (Whitehead and Perry 2020), and participation in organized religion may provide ‘compensatory resources’ to marginalized groups while promoting ‘traditional-values-oriented schemas’ that suppress sociopolitical action (Schnabel 2021). The marriage of religion and correctional redemption are perhaps unsurprising bedfellows given the shared language of ‘individual transformation’ (McRoberts 2002) and self-help ideologies (Sered and Norton-Hawk 2014). In fact, correctional facilities view narratives of religious transformation as legitimate modes of rehabilitation (Kaufman *et al.* 2019; Warr 2020). Religious narratives can promote compliance with penal actors (Armstrong 2016; see also Fleetwood 2014) and may motivate desistance (Maruna 2001; Hallett and McCoy 2015). Whether challenging or supporting dom-

inant state discourses, scholars agree that religion shapes experiences of social control in prison (Sumter 2006).

The current study intervenes in prior literature in three ways. First, it adjudicates between competing debates on the role of religion with regard to punitive discourses on responsabilization. The findings below examine how Protestant discourses both challenged dominant discourses on an interpretive level while aligning with them on a practical level. Second, this study brings an intersectional analysis to bear on how women—and disproportionately women of colour—draw on religion to navigate responsabilization discourses that pertain to their femininity and motherhood status. Finally, it links institutional discourses to individual-level actions, contributing to the growing body of scholarship on how individuals draw on carceral discourses to narrate their lived experience of punishment.

## METHOD

The data are drawn from 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork inside a US state women's correctional facility that I call Mapleside Prison, carried out between April 2014 and May 2015.<sup>1</sup> Mapleside confines approximately 1,000 women of all security levels. The population comprises even proportions of Black and white women, with a lower share of Latina women. Ages range from 18 to over 80 years; average age is 36 years. Average length of incarceration is 3.5 years; stays range from 7 months to life. The largest shares of women are convicted of drug offences and murder; the next most common offences are larceny and assault.

I visited Mapleside 2–4 days per week, averaging 3.5 hours per visit and totalling 446 hours of observation inside prison walls. Over the course of observations, I conducted semi-structured field interviews with hundreds of prisoners, correctional officers ('officers', here on), volunteers and staff. I was granted access to Mapleside's 'Main Hall', which houses the gym, cafeteria, classrooms and chaplain's office. The atmosphere was sterile and uninviting: cement walls, tile floors and a perpetual odour of cleaning fluid. I observed a range of activities: banter in the cafeteria, arguments in the hallways and study time for General Education Development classes in the computer lab. I witnessed countless interactions between prisoners and officers, ranging from everyday surveillance tactics to altercations where voices were raised, handcuffs came out and disciplinary tickets sent women to solitary confinement.

Throughout the year, I observed religious activities, including scriptural studies and worship services for a range of faith traditions. Although official statistics are unavailable, about half of the 1,000 women at Mapleside participated in religious activities. The Protestants were the largest religious group, representing 63 per cent of women, and are the subject of this article. [Table 1](#) shows the distribution of religious affiliation at Mapleside.

The Protestant group was an umbrella affiliation, holding a Sunday worship service for an average of 260 churchgoers each week, with denomination-specific Bible studies held separately. This group encompassed a variety of theological orientations, contingent on the affiliation of volunteer preachers ([Table 2](#)). The largest share of volunteers were Baptist (44 per cent), and the second largest share were non-denominational Christians (26 per cent). Volunteers hailed from evangelical Protestant and historically Black churches, from mainline African Methodist Episcopal (AME) to charismatic Baptist, Pentecostal and non-denominational Christians ([Shelton and Cobb 2017](#)). I observed Protestant activities nearly every day of the week: Sunday church services, Baptist Bible study, AME Bible study, non-denominational Youth Bible Study for women under 25, ministry classes, self-help classes, religious movie screenings, special

1 All names are pseudonyms. I secured approval from my university's Institutional Review Board, Mapleside administrators and the state Department of Corrections.

**Table 1.** Religious affiliation of Mapleside incarcerated population

Religious group	Percentage affiliated <sup>a</sup>
Protestant	63
Catholic	7
Sunni Muslim	5
Lutheran	4.5
Wiccan	3.5
Seventh-Day Adventist	3
Jehovah's Witness	2
Nation of Islam	2
None	2
Jewish	1.5

<sup>a</sup>Official records of the entire prison population circa January 2015. Parameters are presented in percentage form to disguise distinguishable characteristics of the prison (i.e. exact size of population). Percentages do not total 100 due to exclusion of groups that did not convene for services at the time of the research (e.g. Native American, Moorish Scientist).

**Table 2.** Denominational affiliation of Protestant volunteers at Mapleside, 2015 ( $n = 27$ )

Denomination	Percentage affiliated ( $n$ )
Baptist	44% (12)
Non-denominational	26% (7)
African Methodist Episcopal	11% (3)
Pentecostal/Apostolic	8% (2)
Other	11% (3)

events and holiday services on Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Although I was prohibited from using a tape recorder, and private interviews were difficult to coordinate, I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 women: 9 Protestants, 3 Catholics, 2 Jews, 1 Jehovah's Witness and 3 Agnostics. I transcribed their responses in real time in my notebook. These were in addition to informal conversations with hundreds of those who lived and worked at Mapleside.

My field notes written at the end of each day chronicled what I witnessed, along with quotes scrawled verbatim. Analytical memoing throughout fieldwork enabled me to consider what I was finding in light of existing literature. I analysed the nearly 900 single-spaced pages of field notes using a 'flexible coding' process (Deterding and Waters 2018) in *NVivo*. First, I coded broad topics, such as belief, conversion, family, forgiveness, identity, parole and rules of prison. In the second round of coding, I identified variation. For instance, 'rules of prison' was divided into analytic codes for rule-breaking and rule-following, searching for patterns across individuals and situations. This process allowed me to locate deviant cases for each code, ensuring that my coding scheme did not privilege upholding prison rules over breaking them and vice versa. I then compared the relevance of different interpretive theoretical frameworks by analysing code frequency, code co-occurrence and deviant cases. Drawing on an abductive theoretical approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), I sought patterns unanticipated by extant scholarship. In this case, the extent to which religious codes such as 'believing in God' co-occurred with 'rule-following' led me back to the literature on religion, responsibilization and penal control.

My own identity shaped this research, from getting access to asking questions to coding the data. Elsewhere, I reflect on how privileged characteristics of race and educational status facilitated the D.O.C.'s approval of my proposal (Ellis 2021). I was mindful of the blinders created by my whiteness and social class privilege. In the field, participants' candour and enthusiasm were continually humbling. I viewed incarcerated women and staff as experts consenting to share their experiences and knowledge with me. My priorities were to ensure informed consent and conduct fieldwork as a two-way street in which I was subject to as much questioning as the women in my study. Religiously, my upbringing in an interfaith household (Jewish and Catholic) encouraged my curiosity about all faiths. As I worked towards building sincere connections with the women who chose to participate in my study, there were frequent occasions in which participants prayed for my salvation, knowing that as an adult, I identify as Jewish, and repeatedly asked whether I was ready to 'dedicate my life to Christ'. Last, I acknowledge that my connection to Chaplain Harper, the full-time chaplain on staff, herself a Baptist, might have impacted respondents' frank discussions of religion and rule-following. I hoped that my background as an outsider to both Protestantism and the prison social order could lessen this potential limitation.

## FINDINGS

This section will demonstrate how Protestant messages served dual purposes in light of punitive responsibilization discourses. Interpretively, they offered a deeply meaningful counterpoint by describing prison as part of God's plan. The weight of accountability shifted from the 'flawed' individual in the state's eyes onto greater divine omnipotence. Nevertheless, religious activities could not disentangle from the intractable prison context. When devout women described enacting their self-narratives, they attributed divine support for adherence to prison rules and state authority, such that responsibilization discourses re-emerged through a normative religious lens.

### Preaching incarceration as part of God's plan

One of the most prevalent discourses amongst Protestant preachers urged women to reinterpret their incarceration from a religious perspective. For example, I observed a Protestant worship service one sweltering summer evening led by Pastor O'Neill, an outside volunteer from a Pentecostal church. Industrial-sized fans blared in a feeble attempt to cool down the windowless gym serving as a makeshift chapel. Churchgoers waved cardboard hand fans donated by a local funeral home, knowing their efforts would be ineffective next to the June heat. After reciting *Acts 4:1–13*, in which apostles were jailed for preaching the gospel, Pastor O'Neill shouted into the microphone over the din of fans, '82% of people in the Bible went to jail. Jesus *Himself* went to jail. Pastor O'Neill equated the incarceration of the women at Mapleside with that of the apostles, and even Jesus, reinterpreting punitive discourses to suggest that imprisonment should not be a source of stigma, but rather a sign of righteousness. Sweat clinging to his brow, he continued with a grin: 'You know why the caged bird sings'. Referring to Maya Angelou's cultural touchstone, Pastor O'Neill roused a feeling of personal dignity against the affronts of structural injustice. Attendees' enthusiasm was palpable as they applauded. Discourses of dignity resonated, contrasting punitive messages describing incarcerated women as categorically 'dangerous' or 'irresponsible' by virtue of their carceral status (McCorkel 2013). Anne, for instance, shared during a field interview, 'With my sentence, I'm not going to get out until 2058. I'll be 86 years old at that time, if I'm still living ... [Religion] is something here that I want to have a hand in. It's one of the few things here I'm not ashamed of'.

Relatedly, Protestant preachers urged women to construct their self-narratives using a religious lens. During a field interview with Kathy, a Methodist volunteer, she remarked on the faded 'D.O.C.' lettering printed on the back of prisoners' standard-issue uniform. Instead of 'Department of Corrections', Kathy told me, 'I call 'em Daughters of Christ'. Kathy's renaming emphasized women's religious identity over their carceral status. Chaplain Harper took the same tack when she reflected, 'I look and see a woman who God loves. I don't see a criminal'. Such language offered reprieve from critical characterizations by viewing incarcerated women as worthy Christian believers.

Contrasting the pervasive responsabilization discourses proffered by state officials, religious clergy deemphasized the role of crime in the meaning of incarceration. Pastor Young's sermon during a Sunday worship service epitomized this pattern: 'God does not care what you did. If you asked for forgiveness, He cast it into the sea of forgetfulness. [God] gave you a clean slate'. Applause reverberated in the congregation. Messages replete with forgiveness were poignant, and the notion of a 'clean slate' directly contradicted dominant responsabilization discourses from the state. Energized by the exuberant crowd, Pastor Young cried out, 'You're not serving time, you're serving Christ'. In this message, incarceration was subsumed by the religious purpose to 'serve Christ'. Discourses of retribution and responsibility were replaced by forgiveness and spiritual purpose.

Pastor Young was not alone in preaching this competing discourse. Protestant clergy routinely cast prison as part of God's plan. Reverend Mona's lesson on prison as a 'necessary struggle' proved an exemplar. A well-heeled Pentecostal minister, Reverend Mona taught a Ministry course in which attendees listened with rapt attention to tales of miracles and womanhood. 'God uses us *through* suffering', she explained. Drawing on the biblical metaphor of exile, Reverend Mona described imprisonment as suffering aligned with a larger divine plan. 'You are exiled', she lectured. 'That's why you're here. Some of it is what you did, but some of it is because He wants you to be here'. The two-dozen students nodded their heads and jotted in their notebooks. While acknowledging the role of crime, Reverend Mona emphasized an equal measure of divine providence. The 'suffering' that she described resulted in part 'because He wants you to be [in prison]'. This message reassured devout women of a greater purpose for their being incarcerated, while necessarily including implicit deprivations, from noisy cellblocks to constant scrutiny to restrictions on individuals' self-expression. Given the 'inevitability' (Carrabine 2004) of prison rules and harsh conditions, this religious idea offered reprieve from a dominant discourse of the grim prison environment as 'deserved punishment' for misdeeds.

Ms. J disseminated a similar message when teaching her weekly Christian self-help course. One evening in class, Ms. J explained, 'This [incarceration] is an assignment, a test. ... Your assignment is not always good'. Prison should be understood as a pre-ordained 'test'. Ms. J offered a rhyming mnemonic: 'New level, new devil'. The implication was that prison was the 'new devil' to attain a higher spiritual level. As Ms. J insisted during another class session, 'You don't get to choose your [God-given] assignment'. Incarceration, then, was not a product of personal choice or a byproduct of wrongdoing, but rather an assignment from God. This derived from a broader idea of the role of fate in everyday life: 'Good, bad, or indifferent, everything is spiritual', Ms. J enumerated: 'Your judges, the court? Spiritual'. Construing everything as spiritual, including court actors and incarceration itself, Ms. J encouraged women to interpret all aspects of their lives as part of God's 'assignment'. This message stood in stark contrast to notions of personal responsibility that permeated neoliberal prison discourses.

Echoing the idea of prison as a divine 'assignment', Apostle Kendra, a non-denominational Christian volunteer, preached that women should 'accept' prison as part of God's plan. It was Mother's Day, a time when many women most viscerally shouldered the heartbreak of separation from their children. That morning, Apostle Kendra insisted in her sermon, 'You have to



*accept* that you supposed to be here.' Trying to relate to the women confined to months, years or decades at Mapleside, Apostle Kendra reflected, 'We've all been through things.... No matter what you done, you ended up here for a reason that you haven't fulfilled yet'. Emphasizing the spiritual purpose for incarceration, she announced, 'You need to stay here, that's your assignment'. In reframing incarceration as decreed by God, the harsh deprivations of a prison sentence were conspicuously absent from discussion. There was no mention of being locked inside a 7' x 10' double-occupancy cell, crowded by twin-sized bunk beds without an ounce of privacy—even when using the steel toilet in the corner. Nor was there a discussion of incarceration as forced separation from one's children, perpetuating a legacy dating back to US slavery. Instead, Apostle Kendra sought to encourage women to navigate these harmful conditions as a spiritually productive 'assignment', rather than as resignation in defeat. Responsibility shifted from a focus on accountability for criminalized activity to survival of imprisonment as a challenge from God.

What did it mean to 'serve Christ' rather than 'serving time', as Pastor Young put it, or to 'accept' one's 'assignment', as Apostle Kendra urged? While offering solace, these discourses also sought to guide future action. Protestant messages encouraged incarcerated women to enact their self-narratives as Christians. For example, during an interfaith Thanksgiving service led by Chaplain Harper, she asked the congregation to bow their heads as she said, 'View your time here as a training, [as] time to strengthen your spiritual muscles'. Similarly, at a Youth Bible Study session, Pastor O'Neill insisted, 'God is not concerned about your crime. He's concerned about what you're going to do *next*. He wants you to get out of a criminal mentality'. For Pastor O'Neill, this required action: 'When God allows time-outs in your life, He's giving you the opportunity ... for your soul to grow. It's all about motivation'. Echoing the paternalistic language noted by scholars of women's incarceration (Haney 2010), Pastor O'Neill reckoned that God's 'time-out' meant an 'opportunity' to change behaviour 'to get out of a criminal mentality'. This message fell squarely in the realm of gendered, neoliberal self-improvement (see also McRoberts 2002). Indeed, as the next sections will demonstrate, volunteers and clergy encouraged self-directed transformation that ultimately aligned with responsibilizing behavioural norms promoted within the restrictive prison context.

### Enacting Protestant discourses by adhering to prison rules

At Mapleside, enacting Protestant discourses connected to a particular orientation towards prison rules. Maria's discussion at a weekly 'Discipleship' class exemplified this orientation. Maria is serving a 25-year sentence at Mapleside. In the 7 years since her arrest, she has become a devout Baptist, participating in ministry activities nearly every single day. Maria is so involved that Chaplain Harper appointed her to teach a class to 'babes in Christ', in her words, or recently born-again women, from an evangelical perspective on how to be a good Christian disciple.

'We got to follow the rules', Maria implored the group of ten other incarcerated women. It was an unseasonably warm afternoon in mid-October as Maria began her lesson by connecting scripture from 2 *Corinthians* to recent events. The day prior brought apocalyptic weather: the sun went dark, the winds howled and the skies opened. Hearing news of a tornado warning, the women confined to Mapleside could do little else than pray that the same towering walls that locked them in would be strong enough to withstand the cruel storm. Maria described peering through the narrow sliver of a window in her cell, wondering, 'Who gonna make it?'

Yvonne, a student in the class, chimed in. Yvonne recounted that during the storm, she got down on her knees and prayed: 'Lord, I thank you. I repent now for all my sins'. Hearing this, Maria admonished Yvonne. 'Does that *work*?' she asked rhetorically, 'Can we just ask Him to forgive us when it look like the end is near?' Maria did not think so. She warned that faith, especially in end times, was not sufficient to be a true disciple of Christ. Behaviour mattered, too.

'Unbelievers are looking at us 24/7. Everybody who come in here preach that', Maria chided. Volunteers visiting from local churches insisted that Christian women behave like role models on the prison compound. Pointing upwards, Maria reflected, 'If I can't be obedient to the rules of the prison, how can I be obedient to *Him*?' Linking obedience to prison officials with obedience to God, Maria believed that following prison rules was essential to being a good Christian. The other students nodded, affirming Maria's point. Yvonne added, 'The Bible says [to] be obedient to your masters'.

Maria's lesson typified a prevalent approach linking Christian beliefs with adherence to prison rules. Responsibilization through religious redemption focused on future actions in everyday life (Maruna 2001; Fleetwood 2014; Flores 2018). As Nevaeh, an early-30s Baptist woman, put it, 'If you know better, you gotta do better'. Nevaeh's poise and warm smile made her well-liked on the compound. Nevaeh credits Christianity for her calm demeanour: 'I used to be aggressive. When I first got here, I was always fighting and cussing out officers and all of that. But now I want God to use me, for real'. After becoming devout, Nevaeh stopped fighting with other women and quarrelling with officers. Nevaeh cherished that God could 'use' her for a greater divine purpose. Nevaeh drew on this Protestant discourse to motivate conformity with prison rules, narrating a transformation that was far from uncommon amongst women at Mapleside.

Consider Laurelle, who explained how religious discourses shaped her decision-making processes. 'When I first got here [to prison], I was so different', Laurelle recounted one evening at a religious self-help event. 'But He transformed me. It's all God'. A few weeks later during Baptist Bible study, Laurelle reiterated, '[Six years ago] when I got here, I was real violent. But once I got saved, I realized my expectations needed to be on God'. Laurelle's narration of her Christian beliefs was not just lip service—she linked it to action. One month after her self-disclosure in Bible study, Laurelle described an altercation with Officer McClintock, the CO on duty in her cellblock. That afternoon, after a full day's work for meagre wages, Laurelle could choose to stay locked in her cell or go to the Main Hall to participate in a ministry class. To attend the religious activity, Laurelle had to procure a 'pass' in advance, then show it to Officer McClintock, who would open the sliding metal doors to exit the cellblock.

As Laurelle described it, Officer McClintock's attention was diverted that day by a group of raucous women. After repeatedly raising her index finger and telling Laurelle to 'Hold on', Officer McClintock turned to her and said, 'I'm gonna need you to come back later. I can't sign you out right now'. Laurelle was upset: 'Really?' she asked with incredulity, stomping back to her cell. This would mean being late or missing class altogether. The infantilization of lacking autonomy over her schedule was a hallmark of prison life that Laurelle knew well. But after the flare up, Laurelle restrained herself: 'It took a lot. ... It took everything to humble myself'. She decided to march back to the command desk and apologize to Officer McClintock, saying, 'I am a Christian woman, and that is not how I behave'. Laurelle said she did not 'want to blow my [Christian] witness' with insubordinate behaviour. Laurelle's anger subsided when she contemplated the behavioural expectations surrounding her self-narrative as a born-again woman. Her evangelical Christianity extolled proselytization through enactment, as Maria had said, 'Unbelievers are looking at us 24/7', even amidst the daily stressors of prison life. Importantly, Laurelle did not reprimand herself in dismay for feeling frustrated, but rather she reported at her expression of frustration. She and many other Protestant women viewed it as their responsibility to outwardly adhere to the prison authority structure without discernable resistance.

Likewise, Rashida, an Apostolic woman, described a specific instance when she drew on Protestant discourses to avoid breaking prison rules. Rashida was writing a book about her childhood growing up around parental addiction. She maximized her 1-hour computer lab reservation, spending week after week perfecting her manuscript. Rashida planned to mail the manuscript to 13 publishers to cast a wide net. This required 26 stamps—two stamps per let-

ter—which Rashida could not afford given her hourly wages under one dollar. Instead, she devised an illicit workaround to procure the postage. As she reported to a group of other women, on the very day she was about to pilfer some stamps, she stopped herself: ‘I heard God say, “I cannot bless this book out of thievery”’. Rashida decided to postpone her mailing until she earned enough money to purchase the stamps, which might take several months. On top of her faith-based rationale, Rashida’s decision not to steal postage stamps helped her avoid a potential disciplinary penalty that could send her to solitary confinement or thwart her chances for parole. Rashida called on her Protestant beliefs about God’s intervention to motivate her compliance with prison rules.

Heather described a similar pattern of a religiously-transformed orientation towards prison rules. It all started when she ‘switched shoes’ in the visiting room and was caught sneaking contraband into Mapleside. Heather was held in solitary confinement, with no human contact other than the thrice-daily meal-tray thrust through a slat in a metal door. Being locked alone in that spartan room was harrowing enough to challenge even the soundest of minds (Reiter 2016), so Heather planned to defend her actions to avoid punishment.

‘I found a loophole’, Heather explained, ‘I was going to tell them something so that I wouldn’t have to go *on lock*’. Priding herself on being a ‘public defender’ in prison, a nickname for someone ‘who [tries] to get out of things’, Heather was confident in the loophole, expecting to avoid the harrowing fate of prolonged isolation. For all of her life, including the better part of a decade spent serving time for a financial crime, Heather was a practicing Catholic. But the night before her administrative hearing, Heather heard God’s voice while praying. ‘That’s when I was saved’, she recalled. Heather converted to evangelical Christianity on the spot. ‘I went into my hearing the next day and I told the truth’. Believing that God intervened to prevent her from lying, Heather took responsibility for attempting to bring a new pair of shoes into Mapleside, an offence punishable by 200 days in solitary confinement. She bided her time by memorizing one scripture per day for over half a year. Heather’s perspective shifted, from feeling justified in rule-breaking to believing punishment for rule-breaking was deserved: ‘Now I think if you do something wrong you should be punished for it’. The responsabilization rhetoric implicit in Heather’s self-narrative was not guided by carceral authority, but rather by her newfound religious framework.

While it may seem surprising that Heather, Rashida and Nevaeh drew on Protestant discourses to justify compliance with prison rules, scholarship on legitimacy and procedural justice tells us that when individuals perceive legal processes as fair, they are more likely to view institutional authority as legitimate (Nagin and Telep 2017) and comply with the law (Tyler 2003). Indeed, alternative institutional narratives such as those from religion can lead to normative compliance with penal authority as opposed to mere surface compliance (Armstrong 2016). In Heather’s case, her Christian conversion not only shaped her beliefs around God, but also guided her to take responsibility for her actions despite leading to additional punishment. Protestant discourses that framed prison as part of God’s plan cast the fairness of prison rules through an interpretive framework aligned with compliance.

### Enacting Protestant discourses by legitimizing state actors

In the instances described above, Protestant women drew on religious discourses in ways that promoted adherence to prison rules. This section considers how these Protestant discourses—operating within a system designed to promote social control—likewise promoted the legitimacy of state actors themselves. When women mobilized religious discourses to make sense of interactions with parole boards, case managers and officers as guided by God’s plan, they sanctioned state agents’ actions through approval by the highest authority (see also Armstrong 2016).

Sabrina, for example, had returned to prison on a parole violation. Sabrina is active in Protestant activities, attending Sunday worship services as well as 6 hours of Bible study every Wednesday afternoon. When I asked why she participated in so many consecutive classes, Sabrina smiled cheerfully: ‘Last time [I was here], I left before God’s time. I wasn’t ready—that’s why I’m back.’ Sabrina did not blame her return to prison on her parole officer’s refusal to give her a second chance, but instead on her own lack of responsibility and preparedness to re-enter. Viewing God as in control of her carceral timeline, Sabrina continued, ‘I’m trying to take in as much Bible study as I can while I’m here. This time I want to leave on God’s time.’ Sabrina saw fit to make her time behind bars spiritually productive, believing that God’s will would guide the decisions of the parole board. Responsibilization discourses re-emerged through a Protestant lens when the actions of state agents were perceived as aligned with God’s will.

It was common at Mapleside to hear Protestant discourses that cast parole decisions as part of God’s plan. One morning, I spoke with Geneva, who shared, ‘I went up for parole last week. The [Holy] Spirit was telling me “immediate release”, but the parole board said something different. I was really torn up about it.’ Geneva was crestfallen. Following her parole denial, she found solace in speaking to Minister Patrice, a Pentecostal volunteer. Minister Patrice reportedly told Geneva, ‘You don’t know what [God’s] plan is for you. You don’t know how many lives you touch in here. He might need you in here.’

The following week during my observation of Reverend Mona’s Ministry class, Geneva sounded choked up when she shared her story for the group of two dozen students: ‘I had my parole hearing two weeks ago. They told me no, that I would have to go up again next year. I was down, I was real down. I was about to go in my room and hang myself right now.’ She gulped, recalling the intensity of her sorrow. Geneva lifted her hand to gesture to the women sitting near her: ‘The sisters behind me prayed on me ... Now I know ... God wanted me to be here.’ Geneva felt supported by fellow Christians, and found strength in believing in a divine reason for her continued incarceration. Reverend Mona affirmed Geneva’s proclamation in a soothing voice: ‘No parole board can get in the way of God’s will.’ Ceding control to divine authority, Geneva, Minister Patrice and Reverend Mona proffered a discourse that helped women make sense of the parole board’s authority as operating in a pre-ordained manner.

Estrella had a similar experience. Several years prior, she received a mandatory 10-year sentence for drug distribution. As Estrella testified one evening at Baptist Bible study, ‘[A] few months ago, [God] told me I was going home, but I didn’t know how’. Initially, Estrella dismissed the narrative that incarceration was part of God’s plan: ‘God put you here? *You* put you here’, she chortled. Estrella’s smile faded as she considered the issue further: ‘It’s true that I wouldn’t have been alive if I didn’t come here. But I don’t think God was like, “This is my child and I want her to end up in jail”’. Although Estrella was reluctant to attribute her imprisonment to God’s will, she was open to the idea that God could control her legal fate.

Estrella’s revelation was confirmed when her case manager called to say, ‘OK, you’re going up for parole soon.’ ‘And I’m thinkin’ ‘No, I’m not’. Estrella recreated this dialogue for her fellow Bible study attendees, pointing out that her sentencing denied her the possibility of parole. ‘The Holy Spirit says, “Shut up!” So I shut up and listened’. The other women in the room affirmed this testimony with hearty ‘Amen’s’. By ‘shutting up’, Estrella followed her case manager’s directive to prepare for her parole hearing, despite questioning its validity. Several weeks later, Estrella discovered that the hearing was indeed a mistake and was denied parole. Disappointment did not shake Estrella’s faith, although she did not know what to make of her revelation that ‘[God] told me I was going home.’

Months later at a worship service, Estrella bounded over to greet me with outstretched arms. She shared the good news: she had been to court and the judge reduced her sentence. Estrella was cleared to leave prison 2 months later, serving just 3 years of her 10-year sentence without the possibility of parole. Despite initial scepticism, Estrella’s acceptance of God’s ability to sur-

pass state actors enabled her to maintain hope of release in the face of brusque case managers, intimidating parole boards and strict sentencing guidelines.

Protestant discourses viewing God as in control of incarceration also interpreted the authority of prison staff as guided by God. For example, Maria shared a story about divine intervention manifested in the actions of an officer. That month, Mapleside's Protestant adherents hosted a 'fast', collectively abstaining from certain foods—a common practice in conservative Protestant circles. Maria chuckled, 'I am not good at fasting. I'ma keep it real.' The fast required her to avoid meat and bread, 'and I did fine for the first few days', Maria reported. 'But then Wednesday was Chicken Night, so I had that.' Maria had to adjust her fasting plan. 'I thought I would just give up bread, because I thought it would be easier', she admitted. She pinched her forearm and smiled sheepishly, 'That's [my] flesh.' Maria saw this decision as a sign of human weakness: her craving winning out over her spiritual goals. 'Then they had turkey', she sighed, 'And I really wanted to make a turkey sandwich. So I went into the dining hall and brought out some bread to take back to my room.' Maria prepared to sneak a few slices of bread back to her cell, which was prohibited by prison rules. At that moment, Maria believed that God intervened: 'As I was standing there waiting to leave, the CO asks me, "Where's the food you wrapped up?"' Maria doubled over to laugh, then patted her left shoulder, 'Of course it was right there. That wasn't nothing but God.' Maria attributed the officer's detection of her contraband bread to an act of God, preventing her from breaking her fast. Maria surrendered her slices of bread to the officer. Through the lens of divine intervention, Maria saw this as an act of God's will, rather than an act of punitive austerity by an officer. In viewing this situation through a Protestant lens of God's active role in daily life, the outcome ultimately bolstered the state's goal of compliance and taking personal responsibility for illicit actions.

A deviant case adds nuance to our understanding of how and when religious discourses are enacted. Another afternoon during a field interview, Maria described an incident earlier that day when an officer rejected her request to use the toilet. She began, 'I asked [the officer] to unlock the bathroom. [The officer] made a big fuss about it, not wanting to open the door.' With a tone of distress, Maria continued, 'That's not part of the punishment, not letting us use the bathroom. Nowhere does it say we shouldn't have the right to use the bathroom.' Here, Maria invoked a discourse of morality, distinguishing between morality and spirituality: 'I am all about the spiritual, but this was not a spiritual issue. This was a *moral* issue. I'm supposed to be able to use the bathroom when I need to. They treat us like animals.' Juxtaposing this degrading experience with Maria's turkey sandwich vignette, we see that Protestant discourses are not monolithically applied to every circumstance. Here, Maria mobilized a discourse of morality to describe her sense of injustice, noting a distinction with the Protestant discourses she drew on elsewhere. Since discourses—not individuals or identities—are the unit of analysis, we see variation in how they are used to legitimize state authority, dependent upon the situation.

Overall, although prevalent Protestant discourses reframed incarceration as a challenge to neoliberal state discourses of personal responsibility, the enactment of these discourses guided adherence to penal authority. When women drew on Protestant discourses to interpret the actions of state agents, including staff and parole boards, they viewed state goals as working in line with God's will. In this sense, Protestant Christian discourses operated within an environment of social control, such that they ultimately—although perhaps unwittingly—supported normative responsibilization in light of dominant carceral structures.

## DISCUSSION

Decades ago, Foucault (1977) argued that the modern prison replaced public torture of the body with hidden torture of the soul. Recent scholars have taken up the charge to expose hidden

torture of the soul by interrogating how prison officials disseminate harmful rhetoric around what it means to be incarcerated (e.g. McCorkel 2013; Calavita and Jenness 2015). The present study looked beyond official prison discourses to highlight how Protestant discourses challenged dominant interpretations of incarceration whilst supporting normative neoliberal responsibility around adherence to prison rules and the authority of state actors. Empirically, this article demonstrates what religion ‘does’ for devout Protestant women confined to Mapleside, offering a meaningful interpretive challenge to prison discourses alongside an encouragement to adhere to prison rules and authority structures in practice. Theoretically, it demonstrates how individuals draw on available institutional discourses to motivate everyday action.

These findings may upset an array of expectations about religion in prison. Cynics who imagine prison religion as a strategic ticket to early release may be surprised to hear incarcerated women citing scripture and debating its application to daily life. Conversely, those for whom prison religion conjures images of the Nation of Islam may be surprised by women’s emphasis on obedience to prison authority rather than resistance to structural racism. Finally, proponents of faith-based initiatives who view religion as a source of hope and greater purpose may not have considered how religious beliefs might guide Christian women’s orientation towards prison rules. In this article, I demonstrate how individuals drew on religious discourses to motivate behaviours aligned with the legitimacy of dominant institutional goals (see also Armstrong 2016; Werth 2016). As such, we might conceive of *normative responsabilization*, or the process by which individuals draw on higher-order beliefs that motivate actions consistent with dominant neoliberal ideals of accountability and bootstraps transformation. The dual functions of religion in this case study lend further credence to the importance of studying narratives in their context—in this case, the coercive environment of the prison, which necessarily shapes the nature of available religious discourses. With discourses—rather than individuals—as the unit of analysis, it is important to acknowledge varying orientations towards the prison regime (Crewe 2009), such that not all Protestant women enacted discourses in this way, nor were religious discourses enacted monolithically in all situations.

This empirical story hearkens back to the longstanding, complex history of religion’s relationship to punishment. After all, in the United States, whenever religion and the state operate together, there is a necessary jockeying of institutional goals (Sullivan 2009; Becci and Dubler 2017). Yet overwhelming evidence suggests that in the case of prisons, religion has supported state aims more often than not. In the 19th century, during a key moment in American prison history, ‘a Protestant narrative of suffering and redemption ... pressed toward a religiosity of citizenship that holds adherence to the law and obedience to state authority as its highest goals’ (Graber 2011: 184). By the 21st century, we see a growing concern that dominant Protestant discourses of transformation support national myths of bootstraps individualism (Erzen 2007; see also McRoberts 2002). The goal of the present article has been to zoom in on responsabilization narratives to interrogate how Protestant discourses can operate alongside carceral mechanisms of social control, competing with them on an interpretive level while aligning with them on a practical level. To be sure, the interpretive meanings of religious discourses that highlighted incarcerated individuals’ worth and greater purpose were profound (Maruna *et al.* 2006; Johnson 2017) and must not be understated. However, given the ever-widening net of carceral control across surveilling institutions (Kaufman *et al.* 2019), it is necessary to interrogate religious discourses in light of penal control (see also Sumter 2006). We know from extant scholarship that adherence to prison authority is not automatic (Carrabine 2004; Crewe 2009), and resistance to rules is commonplace (Bosworth 1999; Rubin 2015). While prior studies have demonstrated how women make sense of their decisions to resist prison rules (e.g. Bosworth 1999; Lempert 2016), it is equally pertinent to examine how women make sense of their decisions to adhere to prison rules (see Mahmood 2005). The ways that Protestant discourses bolstered

state control through approval by the highest authority informs our understanding of the role of institutions as resources for self-narratives and subsequent actions. Future research should explore how other faith traditions inside prison, especially minority religions, promote or dissuade responsabilization discourses amongst justice-involved populations. Additionally, research should investigate whether and how religious responsabilization discourses vary across carceral contexts in the United States and internationally.

Finally, this article has implications for how religion intersects with race, class and gender in the modern-day administration of punishment. Protestant discourses' emphasis on adherence to prison rules maps onto broader societal demands on women's agreeability and capitalist discourses around deservingness amongst poor women of colour (Gurusami 2017; McKim 2017). Religious discourses that describe prison as a 'time out', as Pastor O'Neill said, 'for your soul to grow', align with the infantilizing discourses that prison officials foist on incarcerated women (Hannah-Moffat 2001; Haney 2010; Fleetwood 2014). Furthermore, in their messages around separation from children as part of God's plan, these discourses compounded the longstanding weaponizing of Black mothers' motherhood against them (Roberts 2004; Dow 2015). Given the entrenched goal in women's prisons to create not only 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1977), but 'docile girls' (McCorkel 2003), we must interpret religious discourses in light of the paradox of empowerment and restrictive control bounded by stereotypes around race, class and gender amongst women disadvantaged in all three categories.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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