Forum

Conversion and Coercion in American Prisons

To the Editor:

What obligations does literary scholarship have to its society, culture, and laws? The question arises in Tanya Erzen's "Religious Literacy in the Faith-Based Prison" (123.3 [2008]: 659–64). The problems with this account of Florida's Lawtey Correctional Institution and its religious-right rehabilitation program begin with the essay's title. One would take "religious literacy" to mean something like "competence in religious history and/or religious doctrine," but in this essay it does not: for here "religious literacy" is a euphemism for total immersion in and complete acceptance of the Southern Baptist belief system. The author calls such brainwashing "religious self-knowledge" (660), though it seems aimed at the obliteration of any vestiges of selfhood. Even the phrase "faith-based prison" is a smokescreen: "faith," a term that in our highly religious and religiously diverse culture has generally positive associations, here conceals the ugly truth that the only faith that counts at Lawtey is fundamentalist Christianity.

Erzen seems untroubled by the fact that at Lawtey "rehabilitation is contingent on a religious [i.e., Southern Baptist] model of transformation" (659–60)—in other words, on the replacement of a rehabilitation model grounded in decades of social science research by one grounded in mythology. She notes without comment that such sectarian programs originated not in penology but in the politics of George W. Bush and his brother Jeb, the former governor of Florida. She does not mention that President Bush's office of "faith-based initiatives" sprang full-blown from the presidential head as an executive order and was therefore never approved by Congress.

Throughout her article Erzen presents—largely without question or qualification—the Lawtey program's often outrageous and unsubstanti-

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ated claims: safe sex is a myth; pornography is addictive; homosexuality is perverse; being "born again" alleviates guilt and shame; faith-based Christian programs (all of them? not programs of other religions?) are successful (for everyone?).

Erzen does not recognize or chooses to ignore the facts that in Lawtey and other such "faith-based" (i.e., religious-indoctrination) prisons the state has abdicated its responsibility to rehabilitate prisoners to churches whose aim is to convert them, that such prisons constitute a model in miniature of a theocracy, and that they commit egregious violations of the United States Constitution.

Does not Erzen have the responsibility of letting her readers know that there is ample case law relevant to the question of religious-indoctrination prisons? For example, on 3 December 2003 a judicial panel of the United States Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals (a panel that included former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Conner and two Republican appointees) unanimously upheld District Judge Robert W. Pratt's judgment against the state (*Americans United for Separation of Church and State v. Prison Fellowship Ministries*), which had found that an Iowa prison program similar to Lawtey's violated the First Amendment principle of separation of church and state. Pratt noted that "[f]or all practical purposes, the state has established an Evangelical Christian congregation within the walls of one of its penal insitutions, giving the leaders of the congregation . . . authority to control the spiritual, emotional, and physical lives of . . . inmates [with] no adequate safeguards present, nor could there be, to ensure that state funds are not being directly spent to indoctrinate . . . inmates."

Or Erzen could have gone as far back as 1947 and *Everson v. Board of Education* to call at least a glimmer of attention to Lawtey's gross violations of the fundamental American principle of separation of church and state. In this regard Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black (a former Baptist Sunday-school teacher) could not be more clear: "The 'establishment of religion' clause of the First Amendment means at least this: [neither the state nor the federal government] can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over the other. . . . No tax . . . in any amount . . . can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions . . . whatever form they may adopt, to teach or practice religion. . . . Neither a state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religous organizations. . . ."

When Erzen tells us that there are plans afoot to open thirty programs such as Lawtey's in Florida alone, why am I not comforted?

Roger B. Rollin
Clemson University

Reply:

Roger B. Rollin misinterprets my article as an endorsement of faith-based prisons. Lawtey, along with the other Florida faith-and-character prisons, is distinct from programs like Prison Fellowship Ministry's (PFM) InnerChange program in Iowa, the subject of the court case brought by Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. Lawtey is a state prison with programs run by volunteers. InnerChange is a Christian program that received state money to run entire wings of the Iowa prison and had an explicit mandate that participants become evangelical Christians. However, as I note in my article, the result is often the same. Despite claiming to be multireligious, Lawtey tends to have predominantly Christian programs, which creates more coercion in an already highly coercive space.

My essay discusses the implications of allowing religious groups to enter the prison as the state eliminates funding for college, GED, and job-training programs. This trend reflects the neoliberal rationale of the federal office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives under the Bush and Obama administrations. I argue that faith-based programs treat imprisonment as a matter of individual conversion and redemption and fail to address the racial, social, and structural causes of incarceration. Unfortunately, the

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