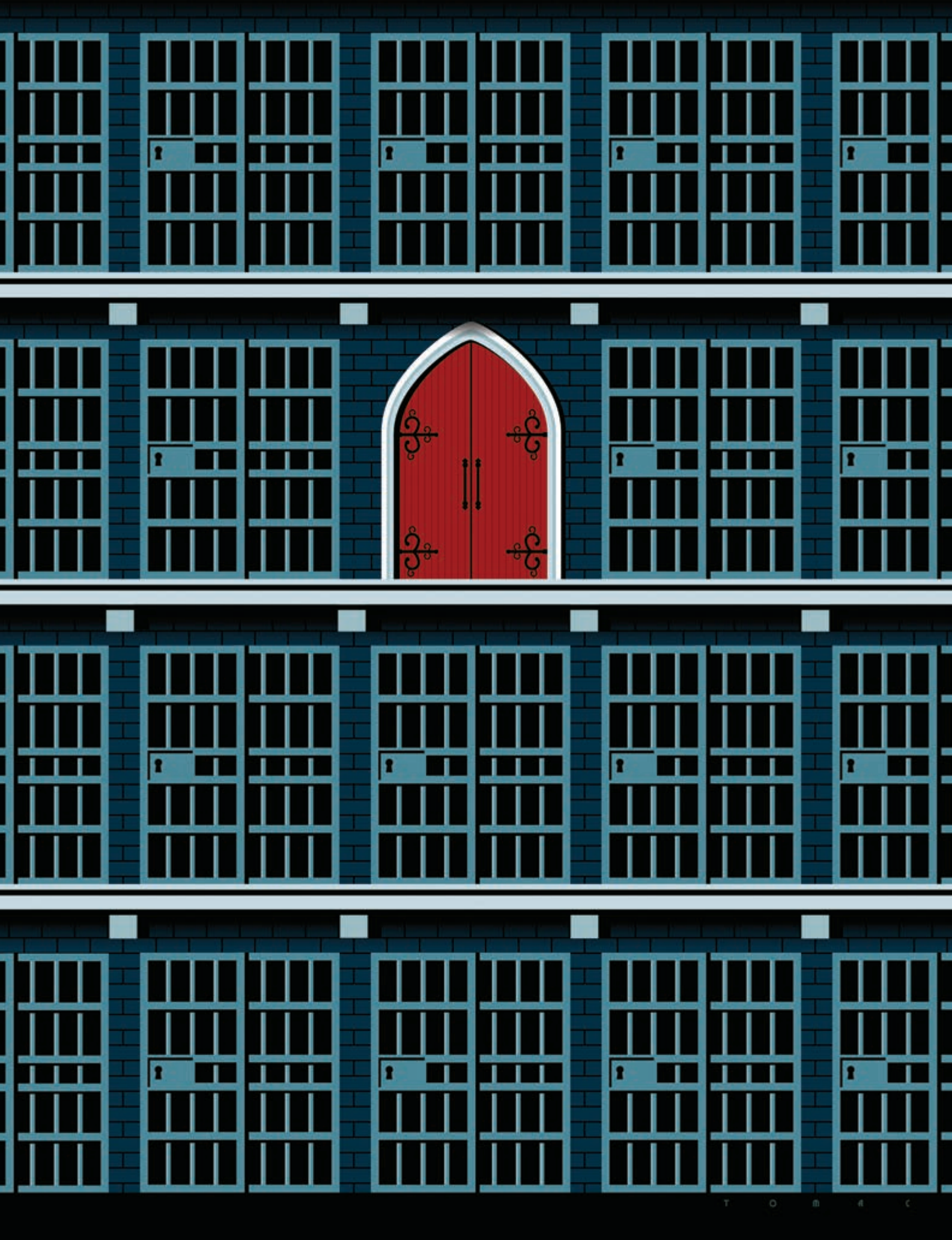

Down *in the* Chapel

In the chapel of a maximum-security prison, a scholar of religion searches for lessons about life, justice, and spirituality—and the forces that shape them.

By Joshua Dubler

HOW, IN GOD'S NAME, HAS IT COME TO THIS?

Any answer can only be partial, but here's a survey: by a bounteous universe (honor it by what ever name you choose), by a sun that makes things outgrow their bounds, by a nature that continues to slowly come undone, and, lastly, at the fragile margins, by the actions and inactions of women and men.

Somewhere along the way, eons after it all began, clans of men, women, and children began to till the earth. Affixing themselves to the land and to the calendar by which their crops were sown and reaped, these men and women gradually developed a set of activities, some immediately germane to material flourishing and some seemingly extraneous to it. Here we might take special interest in the "less useful" activities: our forebears cut symbols into rock, they fashioned semblances out of pigment, they made music, and they danced. They played games. The children watched them do it, the parents showed them how, and the practices survived them all.

Much later, in the same corner of the world, in a trend spanning roughly a millennium and a half—and henceforth the historical record will substantiate our conjecture—a handful of influential visionaries were credited with gaining access to a realm of reality beyond reality, whereby they received, from an invisible being regarded as to some

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degree sovereign over all that they saw and didn't see, a set of amendments to the laws by which they lived. Let us call the commemoration of these wondrous encounters and the enactment of their consequent prescriptions religion (though as a category presuming to isolate an elementary component of our species' nature, religion will only emerge much later). On their merits, too, as well as via conquest, trade, and emigration, these cultural and religious forms spread, mutating with each and every transmission. Eventually, they even traversed the ocean. Toward the very end of our story, in a uniquely idealistic and opportunistic hour, a country was founded.

It is here, in the new American republic, that we stumble upon the curious innovation that will one day furnish our seven days their improbable setting. For it was in Ben Franklin's Philadelphia that a group of middle-class Quakers and their fellow religious progressives, having grown disgusted and horrified with the going forms through which public depravity was censured, revolutionized punishment. On the strength of their mobilization, the age of the stockade, the whip, and the gallows was declared over. In the modern era, punishment was to be softened, transformed from a system that extracted recompense from the body into one intent on mending the soul. Henceforth, the debauched offender was to be removed from his corrupting environment and placed in a penitentiary, where, by means of a solitary encounter with the divine light dwelling within him, he would be reformed. At Philadelphia's famed Eastern State Penitentiary, which opened in 1829, the aspiration of holy encounter was literalized architecturally with the placement of skylights—"eyes of God"—through which the sequestered prisoner might come to see himself as the Almighty saw him, slough off his sin, and repent.

In theory, the penitentiary was to have been the quintessentially modern institution. And by means of surveillance and instruction, its product, the transformed man, henceforth to be known as the prisoner, was to be the archetypal bearer of what theorist Michel Foucault would a century and a half later call the "modern soul." As iconically illustrated via Jeremy Bentham's idealized prison, the panopticon, Foucault's elegantly simple idea was this: if people are unsure whether or not they are being watched, they will assume responsibility for policing themselves.

In this manner, as a properly disciplined modern subject, the prisoner was to have been rougher hewn, for sure, but in the end fashioned not all that differently than the factory worker, the soldier, the student, and the patient—a man endowed in body and mind with the requisite know-how to act (and only to act) in the productive manner befitting his peculiar social position.

Things didn't turn out as planned. The silence and solitude of Eastern State inspired madness more than rectitude. Before long, as incarceration became the norm, solitude itself was sacrificed to overcrowding. Reformist zeal proved fleeting. By the mid–19th century, the penitentiary's founding aspiration had been

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largely abandoned, leaving the institution branded with its name to hobble on without coherent philosophical justification, a machine without a ghost. In the public conceptualization of crime, the pendulum swung—much like it did again in the final decades of the 20th century—from Quaker environmentalism to Calvinist fatalism. Moral turpitude came to be seen not as a collective product of rotten environments but as the intrinsic nature of rotten men, and, gradually, as driven by the shaping power of the ownership class and the spirit of American racism, the modern prison grew into the appropriate instrument for the infliction of just deserts.

In the chapel, this epic history is also local history. For when Eastern State was mothballed in 1971, its prisoners were dispatched to Graterford Prison. Back then Graterford's population was only half of what it is today. But then came the wars on crime, then on drugs, and, eventually, on terror. Interests lobbied, people organized (and failed to organize), government officials did their things, and the system changed with the times. More and more prison time was handed out to more and more people, such that something like 2.3 million Americans will spend tonight in prison or in jail.

'Unlikely Historical Contingencies'

AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY PROVIDES ONE WAY TO ACCOUNT FOR THE ARRAY of dispositions on display in the chapel. By linking imprisonment to reform, the religious beginnings of the penitentiary left their institutional traces, as did, more diffusely, the second and third Great Awakenings, when practices empowering individuals to draw their own theological conclusions proliferated, thereby presaging ever more innovation. Recent trends have been more directly determinative: the Great Migration north of African Americans during the early decades of the 20th century and the attendant urban improvisations that made Islam in its varied articulations part of the black religious vernacular; mid-century litigation undertaken by religious outsiders that stretched the narrow conception of what qualified as protected free exercise under the First Amendment; the prisoners'-rights movement of the 1960s, in which religious prisoners, predominantly members of the Nation of Islam, agitated for and won rights to possess religious literature and ritual implements and to assemble for prayer; the explosion by more than 600 percent of the national prison population over the final three decades of the millennium; the pro-religion spirit of our political era that has brought new public and private support for religious programming on behalf of incarcerated men and women even as other educational and therapeutic opportunities have dissipated; and, at Graterford, the 1995 raid and subsequent chapel shake-up. By enabling some moves and circumscribing others, this unlikely sequence of historical contingencies—sometimes recalled, mostly forgotten, and always contested—lives on in the chapel's practices.

'Thoughts Come in a Flood'

FOR AN ACCOUNT MORE ATTENTIVE TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, INDIVIDUAL men may furnish a second starting point. At Graterford, one could make the

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Belief Behind Bars

"Prisons," says Joshua Dubler, "are the closest thing I have to a calling."

When the assistant professor of religion was a child, his mother worked at Rikers Island, the primary jail system for New York City, and Dubler says that he has "lived the age of American mass incarceration, where the prison population has exploded by about 500 percent."

A new book by Dubler, *Down in the Chapel: Religious Life in an American Prison,* is the product of fieldwork he carried out in Pennsylvania's Graterford maximum-security prison in 2005 and 2006. It brings together his commitment to exposing the realities of the American prison system and his curiosity about religion. "I was raised quite observantly by people who are fundamentally kind of agnostic—agnostic Orthodox Jews. By the time I figured that out, I found that very interesting," Dubler says. He earned his doctorate in religion at Princeton for the project that is now *Down in the Chapel.*

The scholarly book, which reads much like a novel, follows over the course of a week a group of about a dozen prisoners who work in Graterford's chapel. Dubler himself figures as a character in the book, as he traces his interactions with the men: Muslims, Christians, Jews, Catholics, an atheist. The chapel is a kind of workplace, where Dubler and the others discuss their beliefs, their world views, and their experiences with the prison system. He calls the ways that the men adjust to a life term in prison "a central drama of the book."

Joshua Dubler

"When I'm not in the habit of going to the prison, it's shaking," Dubler says. "It's a kind of monument to human waste and human pessimism. But once you're there every day, it's like any other environment: you acclimate to it, and it becomes normal." He began the work convinced that he didn't want to produce a piece of disinterested scholarship, but initially he tried to operate simply as an observer. He quickly found that impossible. "So I got to a place where I was mixing it up with people. That was fun for them, and fun for me. People, especially with something they care about tremendously—which for most of these men is their religious beliefs and practices—they're excited to talk about it. I think I made their lives temporarily less boring."

There are two assumptions people tend to make about prisoners' relationship to religion, both wrong, Dubler says. The first assumption, based on what he calls "a kind of secularized Protestant theology," rests on the notion that genuine religion "is about conviction in your heart, and because we tend to define prisoners by their crime, we just assume that when a prisoner is pleading a kind of righteousness," he is being insincere. The opposing assumption, he says, is that prisoners come to religion because they have nothing else in their lives. "Religion is more complicated than either of those frameworks allow," he says, an idea that he illustrates through the conversations that fill his book.

"At my most ambitious, I want readers to think about their own role with respect to American mass incarceration," Dubler says. "As recently as 1970, we had about 300,000 people in prison in this country. Since then, our population has doubled—and now we have 2.2 million people in prison. We have 5 percent of the world's population, yet 25 percent of its prisoners. We're in the midst of an unprecedented experiment in locking people up." And as the prison population has grown, he notes, it has done so in a racially disproportionate way, with Hispanics almost twice as likely, and African Americans almost six times as likely, to be incarcerated as whites.

Dubler says that he hopes that *Down in the Chapel* will lead people to question the existing system and to begin to contemplate alternatives.

—Kathleen McGarvey

case, religion truly starts where William James says it does: with "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude."

Having arrived in the prison undone, men must learn to survive confinement, one another, and themselves. Many did not have rich interior lives before, but now the thoughts come in a flood: anxiety in search of assurance, suffering in search of language, anger in search of a foe, chaos in search of order. Of course, these men were once children, too, and do not arrive in the prison as blank slates. They come equipped with religious proclivities born of their families and communities: in the past, there was a grandmother or mother who preached the Word at them, in vain; there was a voice inside their head that knew when they were doing wrong; like the majority of Americans, without thinking about it too much, they've always known that God is who He said He was.

Whether in solitary confinement or in the general population, days at Graterford are frightening, boring, and exhausting. One gets by the best he can. At night, the distractions fade away and the thoughts rush in. It is here where the prisoner is forced, in James's language, to "stand in relation to what ever [he] consider[s] the divine"—which is how many religious men will soon conceptualize the echo of their thoughts. Here anxiety comes for assurance, suffering to make sense, and anger to be honed; here the self begins to erect an order, and here the terrible secrets that a man must keep to survive become the things that only me and God know about.

'Religion Proves a Trove'

FROM THE PRISON'S VANTAGE POINT, HOWEVER, ALL this comes only later. First come the steel and concrete, then authority structures, regulations, and only then the prisoners' religious ideas and practices. And what may we say of these practices? Foremost, as can be said of any social forms that have been around since longer than yesterday: they work. Just as mass incarceration works—not to rehabilitate and reintegrate prisoners (far from it!) but rather to reproduce itself, grow, crowd out alternatives, and become normal—so, too, for these men is religion made to work.

Living in prison is a crazy thing to make men do, but the overwhelming majority of convicts will give it a shot. Strangely and twistedly, men are conditioned by the building, the administration, by the staff, by their peers, and by themselves into making it through another day, another week, another year. The incarcerated men draw on all resources available, and toward this end, religion proves a trove. An illustration might help:

If the convict is alone, shared tribal marks suggest religious faith to be one way of finding his people. More likely, if one already has people from back in the street, then their differentiating symbols and postures are easy to assimilate into one's style, one's affect, and one's language. By aping those who've already figured out how to do it, men begin to make their lives in here. In this

BRANDON VICK

process, there is certainly room for religious meaning. From their pockets, the acculturators pull out penciled Bible verses or Qur'anic surahs, words that they say help them get by. But these bulbs will take a while to flower. More critical at this stage is finding one's footing. Because early on danger is especially acute, one must pay close attention, and check his impulses. If one forgets to mind himself, then a prisoner or a guard will serve as an instructor and burn the memory into his body. But this is less common than it used to be. More likely, should one forget, the task of building self-awareness will be subcontracted to time, a bottomless stock of which is stored in the hole.

After 90 days, the prisoner returns to the block one didactic scar richer. Following a brief spell of clairvoyance, anguish dissipates and boredom returns.

Primed for action by his fellow prisoners, by his cousin who once did time, and, principally—like the rest of us—by what he's seen on television, the convict is pleasantly disappointed to discover that very little, in fact, happens here. Bored one night, with his cellie asleep, the TV out, but the light still on—it could be weeks or years into his sentence—he picks up his Bible. After flipping through its crisp pages, he finds the recommended verses. For the first time in ages, he reads.

Now something is happening. The next night he picks up where he left off. Maybe it's his need, maybe it's his vague sense of readiness, maybe it's the brute power of the printed word, but for what ever reason, he finds that when he reads these verses, he suddenly knows something in a way that he hasn't known anything before. Or perhaps the novice is illiterate. Religious traditions are transmitted orally most of the time, and here it is no different.

Through a third party, he receives word to come down to the chapel on Sunday, that his cousin will be there to meet him. He goes. Jesus, it's good to see him. They hug and reminisce and get dirty looks from the ushers. When it's over, they agree to do it again. And another time. Before long, going to the chapel becomes a normal thing to do. It proves much more enjoyable here than when he was a kid. He enjoys listening to the gospel music, or even to the sermon. Even when he's bored, there's a feeling of camaraderie in being bored with others. And while two years back he wouldn't have believed you if you'd told him, when Sunday comes around he's as excited for chapel as he is for the Eagles. Well, almost.

One tough Wednesday, he gets bullied on the shop floor. He tells himself that if he can just hold it together until Sunday, everything will be okay.

Meanwhile, some of the dudes he saw in the chapel, he sees around on the block. They share a laugh. They start sitting together in the chow hall. These guys give praise to Jesus a lot, and that's a bit odd, as is their talk of how they were saved on such and such a day. Other behaviors make more immediate sense. He becomes attentive to what he's eating: I mean, this food will kill you if you don't watch out! Once a week his new buddies walk the yard, and he joins them. Other than to work, his weekly trips to the chapel and the yard are the only times he gets off the block.

One Sunday during service, the sun is shining and the choir is singing, he is overcome by a strange sense of euphoria, a feeling that the worst has passed and that, in the end, everything is going to be all right. He tells the other guys about it over chow. That feeling, they tell him, is the Holy Spirit reaching out to save him.

A few weeks later, maybe something happens again. As he's been prepped to expect, he feels somehow like a new man: clean, absolved, and deeply grateful. Or maybe nothing happens at all. Instead, ever so slowly, the Jesus talk that once seemed so weird ceases to be so. The man begins to make the religious language his own and, as such, comes to understand his own experience

through it. One of the things he understands intuitively is that he is no longer the same person he was when he first came to prison.

So religion at Graterford works: it works to replicate itself inside its residents' bodies and minds; once there, it helps to pass the time, to give a man tools to survive this boring, scary, and sad place, both in isolation and together with his fellow men. It works to institute self-control, conditions discipline of conduct, of diet, and, especially, of thought. It gives the prisoner the framework to think through who he is, what he has done, what will happen when he dies, and how he might never go home.

Or, just as likely, it provides objects for contemplation so that he doesn't have to think about such dire things. If perhaps never to the stark degree achieved by the jail's edifice and regimen, as a lived practice, a prisoner's religion gives shape to his world.

In its perverse and roundabout way, then, religion at Graterford honors the penitentiary's founding mission, producing men who regard themselves as transformed, and indeed, in a variety of ways, they are. ®

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