Where are the Christian prison abolitionists?

By Joshua Dubler

October 9, 2013

In 1823, John Rankin, an Ohio Presbyterian, wrote to his brother. Rankin's hope was to spur critical self-reflection about his brother's peculiar habit of owning of other men:

> The Africans are the children of our common mother: let us not be angry with them because the sun hath looked upon them; the change of complexion ought never to break the ties of humanity. God "hath made of one blood all nations of men." Whenever we find a man, let us treat him as a brother without regard to his color; let our kindness sooth his sorrows and cheer his heart.

Today, Rankin's reading of Acts seems wholly noncontroversial. But this is, at least in part, a tribute to the power of the arguments made by American abolitionists 200 years ago.

The abolitionists' victory was in no way foreordained, and its realization was slow. When, going on a decade later, William Lloyd Garrison reprinted Rankin's collected letters on American slavery in *The Liberator*, the course of action that strikes us as the only moral non-perversity—the immediate release of all African slaves—remained, even in abolitionist circles, a fairly radical proposition.

It's never wise to allege something approaching equivalence between monumental human atrocities. And in the annals of human barbarism, the transatlantic slave trade is decidedly a unique and horrid chapter. But the reception of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* has brought renewed public attention to the racism endemic to our criminal laws and their enforcement. The ties between American slavery and American mass incarceration have become harder to ignore, and the numbers are shameful:

- Over the past 40 years, the number of Americans in prison has risen more than 600 percent

- Americans account for five percent of the world's population but 25 percent of its prisoners

- The incarceration rate for African Americans is six times that of white Americans

- If current trends continue, a black boy born today has a one-in-three chance of going to prison

- There are more black men living under the jurisdiction of the American criminal justice system in 2013 than there were black men enslaved in the United States in 1850

So while the historian in me bristles somewhat at Alexander's title, I've come to embrace her rallying cry anyway. In its horrors no less so than its triumphs, civil rights is to Americans sacred civic history. From Emmett Till to the Edmund Pettis Bridge to the first black president, we have come—we like to think—a long, long way. And in significant respects we have. But the unmistakable continuities between 19th-century slavery and 21st-century mass incarceration give the lie to this narrative. Civically, we have not, all of us, entered the promised land. A considerable sum were left stranded in Egypt.

At the center of this dawning disgust have been people of faith. Across the country and across the denominational spectrum, church groups have embraced Alexander's book and are organizing around the moral imperative that we change the ways we police, prosecute and punish.

But a handful of exceptions not withstanding, few American Christians have yet to embrace or even entertain the idea that we ought to consider simply scrapping the whole rotten, racist system. Prison abolitionism in the United States—unlike in Europe (pdf)—remains a thoroughly secularist project. While religious voices have long been raised to abolish the death penalty and, more recently, torture, outright prison abolitionism has largely remained confined to the Marxist, residually black nationalist circles where it first emerged in the 1960s.

It might well be the case that as a rhetoric of protest, abolition is a victim of its past success. Mass imprisonment is not slavery, and there's a case for retaining a sacred status for the rhetoric of abolition.

But the legacy of abolitionism is too powerful not to harness. In this era of corporate power and deep political cynicism, people of faith need to boldly declare their principled disgust with the status quo and to dream aloud alternative futures where justice reigns. In the future, will our mass incarceration be retrospectively regarded as a national disgrace? If not, that future is nothing less than a dystopia.

Our weekly feature Then and Now *harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by Edward J. Blum.*