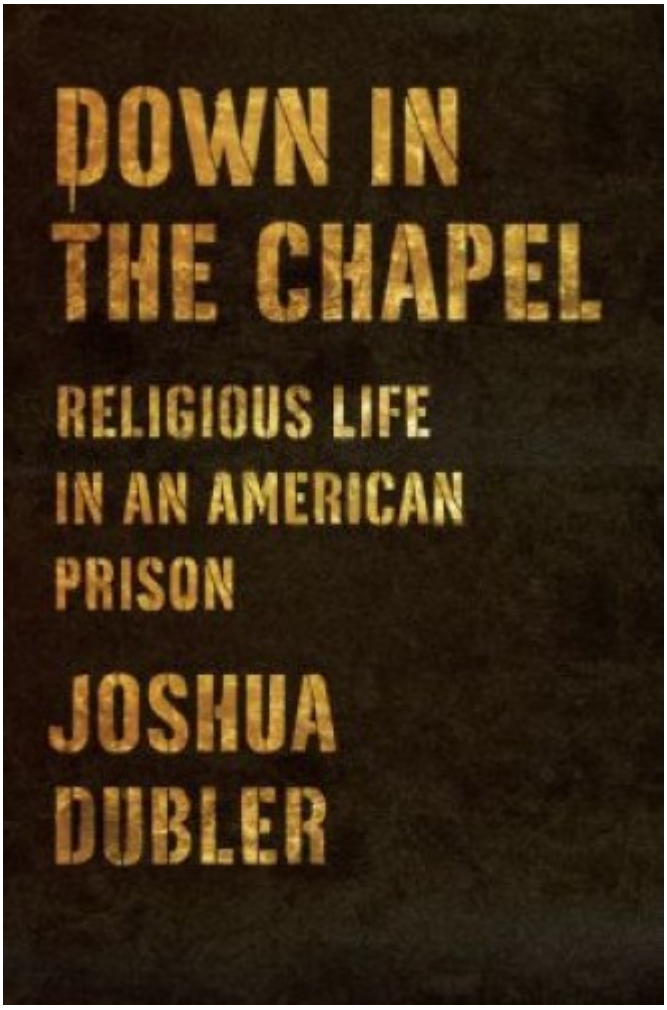
Free on the inside

by Isaac S. Villegas in the March 5, 2014 issue

In Review



Down in the Chapel

By Joshua Dubler
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

The seven of us sit in a room in a maximum-security prison. I come and go weekly; they will be there for the rest of their lives. They tell me about their faith. One man has a calloused bump on his forehead, the result of his *salat,* bowing down to God,

pressing his head into his rug, into the concrete floor of his cell: a dedication to prayer. “Allah found me in my cell,” he says. The other men nod their heads, even though they are not Muslims; they are Christians of various traditions: Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Jehovah’s Witness. Yet each knows what it feels like for his God to find him in prison, regardless of profound differences in theological language and faith practices. When I’m with them, I’m within a religious pluralism unknown to me outside of prison.

In *Down in the Chapel: Religious Life in an American Prison*, Joshua Dubler explores this phenomenon of religious pluralism within U.S. prisons by spending time with the various faith communities that congregate in the chapel at the maximum-security prison in Graterford, Pennsylvania. From the chapel, Dubler tracks the religious practices of the faithful among the 3,500 men confined inside Graterford’s walls. His book is a tapestry of scenes from worship services, small group discussions, and conversations with imprisoned men who open their spiritual lives to him. A Roman Catholic chaplain describes his visitation of the forgotten men on death row as a “ministry of presence”: “to have somebody drop in . . . to show them that they’re remembered.” A correctional officer engages in “Christian apologetics” while policing the chapel. A Muslim prisoner named Baraka’s discussions and debates enlighten the author’s observations of incarcerated life.

Dubler shows up at Graterford as a budding ethnographer and becomes a man captured by friendships—by relationships mediated through religious encounters in prison. “How truly bizarre that this awful place,” he reflects, “should afford such profound pleasure to those who feel called to enter into it and partake in its overflowing meaningfulness.”

Dubler is blunt in describing the awfulness of the U.S. carceral system. Gone are the days of “rehabilitation,” or even “corrections.” Now, prisons have become warehouses for people considered undesirable—“disposable people,” as John Irwin explains in *The Warehouse Prison*. And “warehousing,” argues Dubler, provides the social conditions for an intensity of pieties to thrive. “Inventive and stringent forms of personal purity” flourish in a context of “administrative brutality and cunning.”

This became clear for Dubler when he encountered the faith of religious radicals in Graterford. “Contrary to the public’s fears and wishes,” he comments, “these radicals are ascetics, not revolutionaries. . . . Graterford no longer produces Malcolm Xs. It produces prisoners. Not system shatterers.” As Dubler mentions in a footnote,

this would have been news for the late Charles Colson, who wrote about “the aggressive nature of Islam behind bars” and about the “radical Islamists [who] use prisons, packed with angry and resentful men . . . yearning to get even.” According to Dubler, Muslims at Graterford are radicalized in that they root their lives in older religious practices for a good life, even in prison. For example, Dubler notes the prevalence of Salafism, a form of Islam whose adherents root themselves in “the practices of the Salaf, the pious predecessors of Islam’s first three generations.” Dubler asks a haunting question that zooms in on the justice system and foreign policy:

> Between indiscriminate violence in Muslim countries and the mass incarceration of African-American men at home, if it was our express intention, could we design a system any more conducive to generating insurrectionist ire among black Muslim men than the one we’ve already erected?

For many stuck in the system, religion becomes a way to survive, to sustain the barest of lives. “Chapel religion,” Dubler observes, offers “the embodied know-how to survive prison.” Incarceration converts captives to pieties that provide solace amid the all-pervasive ideologies of dehumanization, materialized in the form of concrete walls, punitive officers, and insouciant administrators. To change the system seems impossible, so hope is found in personal transformation: pieties are techniques for self-creation—“technologies of the self,” as Michel Foucault put it.

Eugene, a Jewish prisoner, explains to Dubler how religion makes it possible to survive the deadening effects of incarceration: “‘What religion in here is about is that they can have this’—he touches his body—‘but they can’t have this’—he points to his head.” Faith becomes a form of freedom—freedom of the mind or spirit or soul, despite the captivity of the body. Eugene goes on, “Spirituality is a way to keep a part of you in reserve that’s not caught up by the system.” When a body is handed over to domination, when a body is enslaved, a person finds freedom through dissociation, through a kind of gnosticism in which the spirit discovers a life outside the structures that control the body. Call it “being privately spiritual,” the subject of Lillian Daniel’s acerbic reflection: “There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself.” Yet for Eugene, soul care is a private spirituality of deep thoughts by oneself; it is a form of resistance, of emancipation, of liberation for people who live as defeated.

Later in the book Dubler explains one of his theses about how religion functions at Graterford and in prison more generally: “It works to replicate itself inside its residents’ bodies and minds,” he writes; “once there, it helps to pass the time, to give a man tools to survive this boring, scary, and sad place.” Religion “works to institute self-control, conditions discipline of conduct, of diet, and, especially, of thought.”

This explanation diminishes Eugene’s claim about the liberating role of faith in his own life. For Dubler, religion is not a resistance against the system, as Eugene contends. Instead, “religion at Graterford makes incarcerated men feel free even as it crafts the cosmos in the prison’s regimented image”; “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.” As he puts it near the end of the book: “Chapel religion does one thing principally: it helps to transform convicts into prisoners.” They become exemplary prisoners, compliant and submissive—“docile bodies,” in the words of Foucault. Prison religion as opiate of the incarcerated masses—the specter of Karl Marx’s dictum haunts Dubler’s book.

Down in the Chapel is a melancholic study, a glimpse into the religious world of faithful people confined in prison, struggling to make a life out of nothingness. His storytelling is captivating partly, I imagine, because he is captivated by the lives of the men he meets, men who welcome him and let him join them in worship, prayer, and conversation. Jack, a prisoner who works in the chapel, finds Dubler during a Roman Catholic worship service. “In all seriousness,” Jack says, “peace be unto you and your family.” Dubler recounts, “I echo back his words, and we embrace.” As he drives back to his neighborhood after the service, he tears up and offers a prayer of gratitude and for strength “to prove myself deserving of the trust these men have invested in me.”

Due to an editing error, in the print version of this review the first paragraph is mistakenly attributed to Dubler as a quote. This online version is the corrected version of the text.