

Theological Libraries in Prison

by Jennifer Woodruff Tait

For over 200 years, American prisons have operated library programs — sometimes even programs planned and resourced by clergy.¹ The challenges of providing resources to the incarcerated are well documented, and today the American Library Association maintains a number of resources for those in charge of a prison library.² As the ALA notes, quoting Thurgood Marshall:

When the prison gates slam behind an inmate, he does not lose his human quality; his mind does not become closed to ideas; his intellect does not cease to feed on a free and open interchange of opinions; his yearning for self-respect does not end; nor is his quest for self-realization concluded. If anything, the needs for identity and self-respect are more compelling in the dehumanizing prison environment.³

While the most famous prison library known to popular culture is probably the one inmate Andy Dufresne maintains in “The Shawshank Redemption,” in reality many prison libraries are run by non-inmates, though they may employ and train incarcerated people as assistants.⁴

More and more colleges and seminaries are beginning theological programs in correctional institutions.⁵ These programs may range from one or two courses to entire programs which grant bachelor’s or master’s degrees in religion. Like any curricular offerings, they need to be resourced, and theological institutions have various means of approaching the particular challenges of providing resources for their incarcerated students. We’ve begun a conversation here by speaking to several librarians who are working with prison programs in religion. We hope that the conversation continues and that we’ll have more reflections to share in future issues.

¹ L. T. Darby, “Libraries in the American Penal System,” *Rural Libraries* 24, no. 2 (2004): 7-20.

² “Prison Libraries: Home,” American Library Association, last modified November 1, 2017. <http://libguides.ala.org/PrisonLibraries>.

³ “Prisoners Right to Read: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights,” American Library Association, last modified July 1, 2014, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/prisonersrighttoread>.

⁴ Valerie Schultz, “Yes, Chief Justice Roberts, a Prison Library Can Be a ‘Very Good Library,’” *The Washington Post* online, December 17, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/yes-chief-justice-roberts-a-prison-library-can-be-a-very-good-library/2015/12/17/fd781f88-a36b-11e5-b53d-972e2751f433_story.html. See also “‘Running the Books’ In a Prison Library,” NPR online, October 19, 2010.

⁵ For example, see Erik Eckholm, “Bible College Helps Some at Louisiana Prison Find Peace,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/us/bible-college-helps-some-at-louisiana-prison-find-peace.html>.