

Article

Abolition Theology? Or, the Abolition of Theology? Towards a Negative Theology of Practice

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Received: 7 January 2019; Accepted: 9 March 2019; Published: 14 March 2019



Abstract: On February 8, 1971, Michel Foucault announced the formation of Le Groupe d’information sur les prisons (the Prisons Information Group [GIP]), a group of activist intellectuals who worked to amplify the voices of those with firsthand knowledge of the prison—reflected in their motto, “Speech to the detainees!” In highlighting and circulating subjugated knowledges from within prisons, the GIP not only pursued political and material interventions, but also called for epistemological and methodological shift within intellectual labor about prisons. This essay turns to the work of the GIP, and philosophical reflection on that work, as a resource for contemporary theological methodology. Counter to the optimistic and positive trend in theological turn to practices, this essay draws on Foucault’s work with and reflection on the GIP to argue for a negative theology of practice, which centers on practice (those concrete narratives found in any lived theological context) while, at the same time, sustaining its place in the critical moment of self-reflection; this means theology exposes itself to the risk of reimagining, in the double-movement of self-critique and other-reponse, what theology *is*. In order to harness and tap into its own moral, abolitionist imagination, this essay argues that theology must risk (paradoxically) and pursue (ideally) its own abolition—it must consider practices outside of its own theological and ecclesial frameworks as potential sources, and it must attend closely, critically, and continually to the ways that Christian practices, and accounts of them, perpetuate and produce harm.

Keywords: GIP; Michel Foucault; theological method; practices; Sarah Coakley; Sharon Welch; genealogy; abolition

1. Introduction

To write theology from a matrix of faith that is intrinsically political . . . requires serious attention to the relationship of the discourse of faith (its symbols, doctrines, rituals, and theological systems) to social and political structures . . . to understand Christianity in terms of its practices, not just in terms of its symbols and doctrines. To examine the power of Christianity, to discern its effects of truth in particular situations, means that the theologian must not limit her or his work to an examination of the internal incoherence of doctrines or their correspondence to traditional authoritative sources of theological reflection such as scriptural traditions, the authentic words of Jesus, or the history of church doctrine.

—Sharon Welch¹

For most evangelicals, revelation was found in inerrant scriptures, and one need not look elsewhere. I knew in my gut that God’s revelation was found among poor black people.

—James Cone²

¹ (Welch 1985, pp. 15, 18).

² (Cone 2018, p. 11).

“In most circles prison abolition is simply unthinkable and implausible,” notes famed academic and activist Angela Davis. Making a case for abolition, Davis opens *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, published in 2003, with the acknowledgement that “prison is considered so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it.”³ Both evidenced and spurred by bestsellers like Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* and Brian Stevenson’s *Just Mercy*, popular Netflix series like Ava DuVernay’s *13th* and memoir-turned-dramedy *Orange Is the New Black*, and the Black Lives Matter movement, a new critical consciousness about the problems of mass incarceration in the U.S. has developed within the last decade, which has led to some notable reforms.⁴ Despite these important legislative and sociocultural achievements, Davis’ claims still, in many ways, ring true—while the overall U.S. prison population has been consistently declining since its peak in 2008, jail populations in a number of states have been on the rise, and private, immigrant detention populations have grown by over 440 percent between 2002 and 2017.⁵ The prison may be viewed more critically, but it remains a very familiar institution within the contemporary U.S.—there are over twice as many carceral facilities within the United States than there are Wal-Mart Supercenters.⁶ Millennials may have caused the downfall of chain restaurants and department stores, but not, it seems, of prisons.⁷

While prison seems a begrudgingly inevitable aspect of the U.S. landscape, this was not always the case. In the early 1970s, the *end* of prison seemed to many to be inevitable. When Norwegian sociologist Thomas Mathiesen wrote *The Politics of Abolition*, published in English in 1974, he believed that he would witness the abolition of prisons within his lifetime. Yet just a little over a decade later, Mathiesen reflected on how the “times are no longer with” the abolitionists—the end of prisons was not only “not exactly imminent,” but rather, there was “a very noticeable movement to the contrary . . . a clear and strong tendency towards expansions of the prison system throughout the Western world.”⁸ In a recent (May 2018) essay in *The Guardian*, Joshua Dubler and Vincent Lloyd reflect on this temporally recent but conceptually distant point in history when prison abolition seemed a realizable possibility. Drawing on Mathiesen and others, Dubler and Lloyd highlight how a focus on incremental reforms and a shirking of an abolitionist vision failed to address, and in fact further contributed to, the problem of mass incarceration, and from there point out that the critical attention to mass incarceration today parallels that of the early 1970s and suggest that we have an opportunity to learn from the past. “Among the reasons the protean movement to abolish prisons fizzled,” they argue, “was its refusal to speak in plainly moral terms.”⁹ Not only did the left retreat from religious engagement, thus ceding the powerful moral language and imagination of religion to the right, which embraced the opportunity with the formation of the Moral Majority, but even religious prison abolitionists “made their appeals in overwhelmingly secular, pragmatic terms.” In doing so, Dubler and Lloyd claim, they failed to

³ (Davis 2003, pp. 9, 10).

⁴ To note just one very recent example: on May 22, 2018, the Republican-controlled House passed HR5682, known as the First Step Act, with broad support (360–59), a bipartisan bill that offers federal inmates “good time credit” for good behavior and participation in education and training programs. After being passed in the House, Senate Democrats and other reformers took issue with the bill’s limited scope, and added changes that will cut the length of prison sentences on the front end, albeit mildly so. While, as of the time of writing, this bill has not yet been passed, on Tuesday, December 11, 2018, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that he will allow a vote on the measure this month. With broad bipartisan backing, from groups ranging from the ACLU to the Koch brothers-backed Right on Crime, and with support of President Trump, the bill is expected to be passed and signed into law by the end of 2018.

⁵ (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2000, 2016; Hinds et al. 2018; Mason 2012; Gotsch and Basti 2018).

⁶ As of October 31, 2018, there are 3513 Wal-Mart Supercenters within the US. See (Wal-Mart Financial Information 2018). According to most recently available data, there are at least over 7036 carceral institutions (1719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 1852 juvenile correctional facilities, 3163 local jails, and over 200 immigrant detention centers). See (Wagner and Sawyer 2018; United States Immigrant Detention Profile 2016). See also (Ingram 2015).

⁷ See (Taylor 2017).

⁸ (Mathiesen 1986, p. 82).

⁹ (Dubler and Lloyd 2018). “In foregrounding pragmatic reforms,” they write, “1970s prison reformers turned away from the rich abolitionist heritage and failed to generate the force necessary for effecting radical social change.” Their critique echoes, and proves the effectiveness of, Mathiesen’s claim in 1986 that “the demand for alternatives from our opponents had been used as a tactical argument to stop us from arguing convincingly for the goal of abolition” (Mathiesen 1986, p. 82).

harness the deeply rooted religious moral imagination that fueled much of the social change in the U.S. like the women's suffrage movement and the civil rights movement. "We will repeat the mistakes of the 1970s," they contend, "unless we emphatically embrace that deeper, broader American moral imagination, one that necessarily taps into our nation's religious stories, images, and rituals." In short, Dubler and Lloyd importantly highlight the ways those working to address the American blight of mass incarceration have missed an opportunity to utilize the religious and moral imagination and resources that are culturally available and rhetorically resonant, and thus have failed to engender change through persuasion in, and of, the public sphere—a failure that has contributed, however inadvertently, to the expansion of the carceral state and the consequent effects of that expansion.

This essay contends with, and seeks to build upon, Dubler and Lloyd's argument from a different angle, on two key, interrelated, fronts: access and audience. Dubler and Lloyd's call for reformers and abolitionists to draw on "that deeper broader American moral imagination" presumes the ongoing existence of, as well as access to, that imagination—to the well of moral and ethical resources found within and crafted through stories and experiences, through histories and literatures and the arts. As they aptly point out, Americans have a rich and deep religious and moral imagination used and developed in and through movements for social justice and change. But, in our failure to draw on that imagination, has the well run dry? Or, to use a potentially more apt metaphor, can new life be breathed into these dry bones?

Raising questions about the access to and existence of moral imagination leads, then, to the question of audience, of the moral actors/agents at play. Has the well potentially run dry merely due to lack of use in the public sphere? Or, has religious discourse and praxis itself played a role? The audience, the "we" that Dubler and Lloyd address, are those, particularly those on the political left, who are troubled by and want to address the problem of mass incarceration. But what of religious actors and scholars? Have they—or, better, given the context of this essay, has this other "we"—also contributed to this drought? Whereas Dubler and Lloyd consider how reformers and abolitionists might draw on a religious moral imagination, this essay asks, how might religion—more specifically here, Christian theology—draw on its own moral imagination? In exploring this related question, this essay argues that an inversion of Dubler and Lloyd's claim is also sorely needed: to tap into the richness of its own moral imagination, Christian theology must draw on an abolitionist imagination.

What *is* an abolitionist imagination, and how might Christian theology draw on it? In this essay, I suggest that theology need not look far, that an abolitionist imagination—the capacity to risk radically reimagining theology and "the good," and, from there, to creatively envision moral possibilities beyond/over-and-against the prison and the logics and systems that govern and uphold it—can be found within Christian theological discourse itself. Yet, I contend, theology has often failed to draw on or fully harness its own abolitionist imaginal possibilities. This essay considers why. To do so, it looks to the "turn to practices" in theology, as a case study—as a site of both critical analysis and potential possibility—and places this methodological and ethical turn in theology in conversation with another turn to practice: the work of the French activist intellectual group of the 1970s, the Prison Information Group. In many respects, the methodological and epistemological shifts proposed and pursued by the Prison Information Group align with this contemporary theological turn. They also, however, offer a critique and challenge, particularly around the sources and aims of such turns to practice. In the pages that follow, I outline these respective approaches, and in doing so, argue for a negative theology of practice. In order to harness and tap into its own moral, abolitionist imagination, theology must, paradoxically, risk, and in some ways pursue, its own abolition—it must consider practices outside of its own theological and ecclesial frameworks as potential sources, and it must attend closely, critically, and continually to the ways that Christian practices, and accounts of them, perpetuate and produce harm.

2. Theology as a Recommendation for Life: The Methodological and Ethical Turn to Practices

The task of theology is always, if implicitly, a recommendation for life.

—Sarah Coakley¹⁰

... credibility comes from good performance, not adherence to independently formulated criteria.

—George Lindbeck¹¹

Why begin here—why make the methodological and ethical turn to practice within theological discourse the object of this analysis, rather than, say, explicit theological engagements addressing the problem of mass incarceration? The easiest, and perhaps most obvious, answer to this question is that it attends to multiple aspects of a key thematic this special issue seeks to explore—“theologies ... and past and present Christian practices that exacerbate, remediate, and arise from within the prison context.” This essay aims to address *how* theologies and Christian practices remediate and/or exacerbate the prison context, and begins to do so by attending to how theology has turned to practices as an important resource for reflecting on its own nature and tasks. The turn to practices has been a way that theology has, importantly, sought to attend to and take seriously the effects of its own internal presumptions and processes. Yet, within that turn, theological reflection on the practices has failed to mine the richness of its own epistemological and methodological critiques and has thus stifled its own liberative potential.

An undergirding assumption both of this special issue and of the turn to practices in theological method is that *how* we do theology—what sources we turn to, what questions we ask, what ends we pursue—matters, and the choices we make on these fronts have real, material effects. The decisions we make on these matters, for instance, reflect and speak to how Christianity engages with other “secular” knowledges, and shape our vision of what constitutes a good and ethical life.¹² In the years, turned decades, turned centuries following Christ’s life and the promise of life borne from it, Christians have grappled with what Christian thought means, and what Christian life should thus look like, in light of the fact that the waiting is taking a bit longer than initially expected. What we know and how we understand and inhabit the world has changed.¹³ The advent of modernity and the Enlightenment turn to reason, in particular, pulled the lid off a Pandora’s box that had been cracked open with the Reformation, bringing explicit attention to, and reconfiguring, the relationship between method and ethics. Critical discoveries in science, history, and philosophy led to epistemological shifts that challenged the givenness of ecclesial authority and the attendant ethical frames. Method was no longer under the purview of ecclesially given ethics, but rather, the inverse now held—ethical vision and action was to be considered through and in light of methodological decisions and developments.¹⁴

Surveys of modern Christian thought and practice outline how Christianity, and theology, initially responded to the cultural shifts brought about by modernity by following one of two paths: resistance, or revision/reinterpretation.¹⁵ Christian institutions and communities either resisted modern insights and values, or, conversely, sought to reinterpret their faith and theology in light of such insights and

¹⁰ (Coakley 2013, p. 18).

¹¹ (Lindbeck 1984, p. 131).

¹² In his book on the theological method, Paul Allen points out that while there is a great deal of literature that *refers* to theological method, “books [that] demonstrate *how* thinkers think about God and related themes,” that “far fewer books deal with methodology as a topic unto itself,” as method is often seen as uninteresting, too philosophical, or both—that “clarifying one’s methodology instead of doing theology is like sharpening a knife without cutting into anything” (Allen 2012, pp. 1, 6). Yet, he aptly points out that the “sharpness of one’s knife determines how well one is able to cut” (1).

¹³ See, for instance (Hays 2016).

¹⁴ Paul Allen notes how, beginning with Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*, “the discovery of method was an embrace of a ‘prejudice against prejudice,’ a move against the bias Descartes perceived on the part of the teachings of the Christian church and the prejudice that this tradition thus fostered” (Allen 2012, p. 6). For more on this shift, see especially David Kelsey’s (Kelsey 1992). Kelsey articulates this shift, and the effects of it, as having produced two distinct approaches to theological education—one of *paideia*, of character formation, and the other of *Wissenschaft*, of research and scientific rigor.

¹⁵ See (Livingston 2006).

values and/or to reinterpret modern insights and values in light of their faith and theologies. Many, of course, sought something between and/or beyond the two, accommodating their theologies, and to varying degrees their religious practices and self-understanding, in light of modern insights and values. A growing recognition of, and dissatisfaction with, the increasing polarization between resistance and revision, as well as the influence of continued epistemological developments in philosophical and cultural studies that began to detail the limits and failures of Enlightenment principles in the wake of World War II, engendered more concerted efforts to forge a third path beyond resistance or revision. Among the most notable and enduring of these efforts is what I refer to in this essay as the turn to practices.

This contemporary theological turn to practices took distinctive shape in and through what theological scholarship understands and refers to today as postliberalism, or the Yale School.¹⁶ Crystallizing around the thought of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, postliberalism pursued a “generous, liberal orthodoxy,” that turned to Christian practice as the way to “balance the twin demands for faithfulness and change.”¹⁷ Lindbeck in particular, shaped by a panoply of intellectual influences—from NeoOrthodoxy and transcendental Thomism, to trends in sociology of religion and philosophy of language, to the then-developing debates in theological method and identity happening amongst his colleagues at Yale—looked to ground Christian identity in Scripture and tradition, understood as a narrative that is to be participated in and continued. In turning to the Christian tradition as a story, Lindbeck saw a middle way between confessionalism and revisionism—occurring through discerning (methodologically) and participating in/adhering to (ethically) a grammar or language and accompanying set of practices. As Paul DeHart explains in his examination of postliberal theology, Lindbeck’s “basic move is to see the ‘carrier’ of continuity as locatable within the semiotic code that rules the symbolic idiom which defines Christianity” rather than in ultimate propositional truth claims or in symbols or expressions of transformed human experience.¹⁸ The credibility of a religious system for Lindbeck “comes from good performance, not adherence to independently formulated criteria,” and through attending to such performance—to Christian practices—“reconciliation without capitulation is possible.”¹⁹

In turning to the ongoing practices, the “good performances,” of Christian community as site and source of theology, Lindbeck offered a way to do theology in the modern era that was attentive to both the tradition and the pursuit of faith as well as to modern scholarly norms and methods. Lindbeck’s work drew on—and, arguably, contributed to—important epistemological developments that critically examined and challenged the supremacy and flatness of Enlightenment era approaches that ignored local knowledges and bifurcated theory from practice. Practices, Lindbeck’s work highlighted, are not only *effects of* knowledge, of propositional truth claims determined by rational thought or claimed by belief, but they effect what we claim as truth and what we understand knowledge to entail. Lindbeck’s work played a significant role in fueling a (re-)turn to practices in Protestant theology. As Lauren Winner writes in her recent book exploring this turn to practices, “the language of practice gave theologians a way of describing and recommending Christianity that would make Christianity capable of doing something for people—capable of forming them. Theologians cared to do this,” she explains, “precisely because they were aware that there were powerful forces—post-Fordist capitalism, American empire—that were malforming people, forming them away from Christianity and towards

¹⁶ I use the term postliberalism here cautiously, recognizing the limits of the moniker—that what, and who, defines postliberalism is contested and unclear, that the term does not reflect a singular, cohesive approach. This is a central claim Paul DeHart makes in his text (DeHart 2006), how the term unhelpfully conflates the distinctive approaches and contributions of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, and that the genesis of the label has veered from the original focus on methodological concerns.

¹⁷ See (Frei 1984, p. 8; DeHart 2006, p. xiii).

¹⁸ (DeHart 2006, p. 170).

¹⁹ (Lindbeck 1984, p. 18).

shopping malls and church sanctuaries bedecked with American flags.”²⁰ The turn to practices enabled a moral imagination that offered an alternative to the dominant cultural moral imagination that many theologians (amongst others) found problematic and sought to resist.

Yet, evidenced in this shift from a turn to practices as a methodological resource to an ethical one—a shift that had its roots within Lindbeck’s own framework—the moral imagination that this turn sought and fueled was also, I want to argue here, paradoxically stifled and delimited. In short, while the turn to practices looked to and sought “good performance,” it also presumed Christian practices *were* necessarily good, over-and-against prevailing cultural practices and norms, and in doing so, has failed to critically examine its own sources and aims.

In explicating and evaluating Lindbeck’s theology, Paul DeHart highlights the important point that Lindbeck’s effort to maintain Christian identity but understand it creatively and contextually was propelled and “dogmatically guided by ecclesiology: the task of articulating the continuity over time of a people of witness, faithfully proclaiming to the world God’s coming salvation in Christ.”²¹ Given this guiding emphasis, Lindbeck’s theology traded in methodological as well as ecclesial/ethical motivations and moved in differing directions accordingly—seeking, on the one hand, to *understand* what marks Christian identity in shifting contexts, and on the other hand, to *affirm and continue* Christian identity.²² These dual aims reveal—and, perhaps, construct—a clean unidirectional, relationship between action and analysis, between ethics and method: what is seen as “proper” Christian practice predetermines faithful interpretation. But what practice is considered proper, and on what grounds? For Lindbeck, this is determined by and in and through Christian community, but what and who constitutes Christian community, and who makes that determination? Moreover, DeHart explains that, for Lindbeck, Christians derive (from Scripture and tradition) “a single, systematic way of generating ‘Christian’ interpretations of one’s cultural surroundings which is of sufficient clarity and detail to guide and norm the theological interpretations demanded of the present community.”²³ But is—and ought that be—the case? What is lost by operating with, and presuming, a unified, singular vision of Christian community, practice, and interpretation? A robust moral imagination is stifled, I suggest, in (at least) two significant, interrelated, ways—this turn to practices fails to attend to the negative outcomes and/or byproducts of Christian practices, and fails to grapple with the epistemic limits and blind spots that impact both methodological analysis and ethical action.

Both of these critiques of the turn to practices are lifted up by Lauren Winner in her recent book, aptly titled *The Dangers of Christian Practice*. Tracing a range of nefarious deployments of Christian practice throughout church history—from the ways the Eucharist played a rather central role in the murder of Jews at the hands of Christians in medieval Europe via charges of host desecration, to how prayer was used to encourage the obedience of slaves in the antebellum South, to the ways baptismal practices reinforced problematic class distinctions and patriarchal norms of domesticity through the “christening party craze” that became fashionable in fin de siècle America—Winner points out that nothing, “not even the good practices of the church, is untouched by the Fall.”²⁴ She argues that, while “twenty-first century Anglophone Christians often speak of practices like Eucharist and prayer only to commend them and laud the benefits they bestow on practitioners, Christians also need to give accounts of, rather than evade, the damages Christian practice sustains by sin,” and that doing so

²⁰ (Winner 2018, p. 171).

²¹ (DeHart 2006, p. 58). Or, as he puts it later, “Lindbeck is grappling with the dialectic of change and continuity in Christian belief and practice, and formulates the cultural form of its perpetuation as the interplay between a public system of signs on the one side and shifting subjectivities and their experiences in changing contexts on the other. *The theological problem which occupies him is that of the accessible locus of stability and identity for the community within this concrete process*” (p. 170, emphasis mine).

²² (DeHart 2006, pp. 61, 62).

²³ (DeHart 2006, p. 173).

²⁴ (Winner 2018, pp. 1, 98).

we can describe practices more truthfully as well as be alert to potential, inevitable, deformations.²⁵ Whereas Winner focuses primarily on the enactment of practices within Christian worship and life, her insights are certainly also applicable to academic theological turns to practices—indeed, in an appendix to her text, Winner turns briefly to how this laudatory recovery and pristination of practices manifests within theological scholarship.²⁶

In turning to practices in this positive way, theologians not only overlook and fail to attend to the way Christian practices also perpetuate damage—how “it is internal to these practices to form those who practice them away from the practices’ own goods”—but in doing so, they also methodologically ossify their own limited account of practices, directing it by and towards their own ethical vision.²⁷ This stifles moral imagination, as faithfulness is determined by what is already normative within Christian religious communities and their practices. In looking only positively to religious practices through their own moral framework, religious practices and the grammar and language discerned from them not only describe a particular iteration of practice in a particular time and place, they describe how one must behave and what one must participate in in order to be faithful. Drawing and building on David Kelsey’s work, DeHart points out that “the church’s language itself [and, by extension, I suggest, its practices] stands in need of constant correction from the God it is witnessing to.”²⁸ In failing to attend to the ways practices themselves are impacted by the Fall, theologians turning to them inscribe into their methodological accounts and ethical frameworks a distorted vision of what practices consist of and what they can, should, and do accomplish.

Moreover, and particularly notable for this essay, in failing to attend to the effects of the Fall on practices both ethically and epistemically, this turn presumes and reproduces a problematic insider–outsider binary. Given how, through Lindbeck’s frame, “a descriptive account has shifted imperceptibly into a search for norms,” Lindbeck’s vision lent itself to an ethical call for distinctive Christian community and way of life.²⁹ Theological ethicists like Stanley Hauerwas drew on Lindbeck to “begin fashioning a powerful model of the use of orienting narratives in the establishment of identity and in ethical decision making.”³⁰ For Hauerwas, it is through the church—the “inherited language, practices, and institutions” of the community of people who follow and participate in the story of God—that saints nurture and “preserve the habits necessary to learn the story of God.”³¹ Thus, “the social responsibility of the church is to be itself,” and in doing so, the church is a witness to the world.³² This operant church vs. world binary, however, does not address the way such practices can go wrong within the church, and presumes and reproduces a clear distinction between church and world.

This latter point is one that Kathryn Tanner challenges at length in *Theories of Culture*. In her examination of “Christian identity in virtue of a cultural boundary,” Tanner draws on postmodern anthropological scholarship to critique postliberal accounts of Christian identity as resident alienship, wherein Christians have their own language, their own ways of doing things, and their own constituted culture.³³ Tanner explains that within these kinds of accounts—of which Hauerwas’s ethics is one—“the cultural forms that constitute Christian identity seem to be, ideally, absent elsewhere. The loci of Christian identity are not, that is, borrowed from elsewhere, but are the spontaneous

²⁵ (Winner 2018, pp. 1, 17).

²⁶ See (Winner 2018), “Appendix: Depristinating Practices,” pp. 167–80.

²⁷ (Winner 2018, p. 180).

²⁸ (DeHart 2006, p. 155). DeHart cites (Kelsey 1990, p. 30).

²⁹ (DeHart 2006, p. 167). This is particularly evidenced within Lindbeck’s theory of intratextuality, a topic addresses Dehart addresses at length throughout his text, especially in chapter two (see pp. 90–100), and in chapter four (see pp. 171–84). DeHart also addresses this ethical turn, explaining that “a recondite discussion of theological method had become a question of the survival of the church’s witness in a secular culture” (36).

³⁰ (DeHart 2006, p. 30). See also (Winner 2018, pp. 169–72).

³¹ (Hauerwas 1974, p. 6; Hauerwas 2004, p. 74). See also (Hauerwas 1991).

³² (Hauerwas 1974, p. 7).

³³ (Tanner 1997, p. 104).

production of the people concerned.”³⁴ Tanner acknowledges that this understanding of Christian identity, which “requires cultural insularity,” is admittedly a caricature, as such accounts “gladly admit that the Christian way of life is influenced by outside cultures, mixed up and modified by them.” Nevertheless, she argues, such notions still “hold on to the idea of a self-contained and self-originating identity for Christianity,” even as they acknowledge this “mixed character” of Christians’ ways of life.³⁵ Yet, given what we know about culture from postmodern anthropology, of how cultures are actually far more porous, and of how power functions within accounts of culture, it is wrong-footed (at best) to speak of Christianity as *a* particular culture, as a singular and discrete way of life.³⁶

Moreover, Tanner goes on to illuminate how this false binary manifests in and through theological method itself. In her chapter on the nature and tasks of theology, Tanner explores how, in presupposing Christian truth claims and cultural contexts as “independently generated wholes,” postliberal methods “prejudge the nature of the Christian practices within which theology is lodged.”³⁷ Turning to practices as the first-order source of theology, and pursuing the methodological task as a second-order reflection on those practices, “implies that those beliefs and values already exist as some consistent whole on the level of practice and that the academic theologian is doing nothing more than laying out the elements of that whole in the proper order they already have with one another. Thus,” she continues, “postliberal theologians might say that on their understanding of academic theology the theologian is simply describing (or redescribing in technical language not characteristic of Christian practice generally) the internal logic of Christian practice.”³⁸ As Tanner explains, in a passage worth quoting at length: postliberal talk of describing the internal logic of first-order practices strongly suggests that second-order theology does nothing more than uncover a logic internal to those practices themselves; the task of second-order theology is simply to make explicit what is already present there in an implicit, unformalized manner. Presumably only one logic is implicit in the practices, to which a second-order theologian is merely to conform [the second-order theologian] criticizes and recommends changes in only those particular Christian practices that deviate from “the” logic or grammar of the faith, a logic or grammar that second-order theology seems simply to be tracing according to its already established outlines.³⁹

This turn to practices, then, “has a normative component whereby some first-order Christian practices, and some second-order ways of making sense of the logic of those practices, are criticized.”⁴⁰ It relies on an internal logic of Christian practices—and, attendantly, of the nature and task of theology that looks to such practices—that fails to attend to the ways sin might impact Christian practices, as well as reflection on them.⁴¹

This abiding logic in the turn to practices, where Christian practices and reflection on those practices is positive, over and against harmful cultural norms and practices that malform, presumes and reproduces an insider–outsider binary that fails to turn critique inward to the way Christian practices also malform, and that relies on an arbitrary sense of what practices are and are not Christian, one that is rooted in and reproduces structures of power/knowledge. In doing so, this turn to practices undermines moral imagination. In failing to address the limits and damages of Christian practices, this turn diminishes its moral authority and voice in a culture that is cognizant of and attentive to

³⁴ (Tanner 1997, p. 104).

³⁵ (Tanner 1997, p. 105).

³⁶ Postmodern critiques, Tanner explains, reveal how modern accounts of culture fail to grasp/attend to “the power dimension of meaning,” how “power is at stake in the interpretations of beliefs, values, or notions with a cultural currency” (Tanner 1997, p. 47).

³⁷ (Tanner 1997, pp. 68, 107). Tanner also critiques revisionist approaches for this prejudgment, explaining that “the whole *raison d’être* of a method of correlation hinges on assumptions about culture as a summary of human universals” (Tanner 1997, p. 66).

³⁸ (Tanner 1997, p. 73).

³⁹ (Tanner 1997, p. 74).

⁴⁰ (Tanner 1997, p. 74).

⁴¹ As Tanner explains, this overlooks the fact that “academic theology is itself a material social practice” (Tanner 1997, p. 73).

such limits—sociological research has shown that many in the modern West experience Christianity as homophobic, judgmental, and hypocritical.⁴² It also misses an opportunity to utilize and expand its moral imagination by delimiting the practices and sources it engages. In the final section of this essay, I explore how these failures and limits manifest within a turn to practices addressing prisoners, but first, is there an alternative? I suggest that there is, and turn to a different turn to practices—one that not only addresses, but engages with and hears from those inside, the prison—as a resource.

3. The GIP, the Insurrection of Subjugated Knowledge, and the Abolition of Philosophy

... how is it possible for philosophy to have no relation to anybody's real life? It is not possible on Foucault's Hadot-informed view. The problem is not that philosophy is irrelevant; the problem is either that what is happening in the profession is not philosophy, or that the way of life it exemplifies has no appeal.

———Ladelle McWhorter⁴³

On February 8, 1971, the French theorist Michel Foucault announced the formation of Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons—translated as the Prisons Information Group and abbreviated henceforth as the GIP—a group of activist intellectuals who worked to amplify the voices of those with firsthand knowledge of the prison, a task reflected in their motto, “Speech to the detainees!”⁴⁴ Like the turn to practices in theology, the work of the GIP, and philosophical reflection on that work, turned to practices as both a methodological and ethical resource. Yet the sources they turn to and the aims of their work differ considerably. This section explores those differences to consider how they might be a resource for theological turns to practice.

Reading aloud what would retrospectively come to be known as the GIP manifesto, written collaboratively by its members, Foucault explained:

We plan to make known what the prison is: who goes there, how and why they go there, what happens, what life is like for the prisoners and, equally, for the supervisory staff, what the buildings, diets, and hygiene are like, how internal regulation, medical supervision, and the workshops function; how one gets out and what it is, in our society, to be one of those who has gotten out.⁴⁵

The GIP turned to practices as a site and source of knowledge, but rather than turning to positive practices or turning to practices in a positive way, the group *critically* examined how practices functioned and towards what ends. Moreover, the GIP looked not only to formal or authoritative accounts of practices, but explored them from below, from the position of those marginalized and subjugated.

This critical examination of practices from below is reflective of Foucault's broader work on the relationship between power and knowledge, evidenced within his archaeological and genealogical methods.⁴⁶ One begins to get a sense of these methods and what they do, as well as what they might

⁴² See (Kinnaman and Lyons 2012). Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, a research and resource company focused on the intersections of faith and culture, was commissioned by Gabe Lyons (of the Fermi Project) to do research on what young Americans think about Christianity. In this text, Kinnaman and Lyons present and explicate the results of this extensive research on young adults who do not identify as religious, a rapidly growing demographic in contemporary America today (they note that “outsiders,” the term they use to describe the nonaffiliated, represent about one-quarter of Boomers and one-third of young adults/millennials [18]. Through their data analysis of over 45,000 participants, Kinnaman and Lyons found that, whereas merely 10–15 years ago, 85 percent of outsiders viewed Christianity's role in society favorably, currently only 38 percent of young outsiders have a “bad impression of present-day Christianity” (24). Young adult outsiders, they found, view Christianity as overwhelmingly hypocritical (85 percent), homophobic/“antihomosexual” (96 percent), and judgmental (87 percent).

⁴³ (McWhorter 2016, p. 36).

⁴⁴ Their motto, “donner la parole” is also often translated as “to give up the floor.” See (Dilts 2017, p. 53, fn4).

⁴⁵ GIP, “(Manifeste du GIP)” (1971), in (Foucault 2001a), No. 86, p. 1043. See also (Zurn and Dilts 2016, p. 1).

⁴⁶ For an explication of these approaches, see especially Michel Foucault (Foucault 1980; Foucault 1972; Foucault 1977, particularly “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” pp. 139–64).

have to offer to theological turns to practice, in Foucault's critical reflections on philosophy, which he articulated in contrasting relation to his work with the GIP.⁴⁷ This is a topic Ladelle McWhorter explores at depth in her essay "The Abolition of Philosophy."⁴⁸ Turning to an interview titled "The Great Confinement" that Foucault gave in 1972 to the German periodical *Tages Anzeiger Magazin*, McWhorter recounts how Foucault refers to philosophy as "no more than a vague little university discipline" and accuses philosophers of distancing themselves from real-world issues and work. "If I occupy myself with the GIP," he explains, "it is only because I prefer effective work to university yacking and book scribbling."⁴⁹

McWhorter outlines how Foucault contrasted philosophy with intellectual work committed to political action—how compared to "political action in favor of prisoners, philosophy is meaningless," how philosophers refused to engage with reality, and could not translate their theories into practice, how, the "university as an institutional apparatus is just a machine for social and political reproduction without division; it is entirely conservative, not the site of real change."⁵⁰ The philosophy that Foucault is referring to and contrasting with the work of the GIP, McWhorter concludes, is "an institutionalized and bureaucratized academic discipline that maintains itself by producing theories with no practical effects except for that of reinforcing disciplinary control and reproducing the status quo" and it disavows its conservative and repressive material effects "by shrouding itself in the mantle of theoretical objectivity and universal rationality."⁵¹ "Foucault opts for the materiality of human contact," McWhorter explains, "over knowledge of any transcendent entity or realm."⁵² Yet, she points out, Foucault's thinking shifted, not in terms of the nature of his critiques, but in the limits and possibilities of philosophy itself. Foucault later began to see possibilities within philosophy done a different way. Turning to early Hellenistic philosophy, and drawing on the work of Pierre Hadot, Foucault saw how "philosophy was a *way of life* . . . a mode of existing-in-the world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life."⁵³ In many ways, Foucault's turn to a Hadot-informed account of philosophy bears much in common with theological turns to practices. Like Hadot and Foucault, the turn to practices in theology sought to pursue theology as a way of life that must be practiced and inhabited—as DeHart puts it, for Lindbeck, "theology seeks to commend the intelligibility of the faith to outsiders by in effect, inviting them to become insiders; it is a matter less of 'translation' than of 'catechesis.'"⁵⁴ Winner, similarly, observes that "there are many resonances between Christian theological reflection on practices and the work of Pierre Hadot."⁵⁵

Yet what is striking about Foucault's critiques and subsequent reframing of philosophy, compared with the critiques and reframing that happen within the turn to practices in theology, is—to return to his work with the GIP, as well as to a key thesis of this essay—the sources and aims of such practice, and how epistemology and methodology utilize and function in service of those sources and aims. Whereas academic philosophy was still invested in the question, "What is the surest path to truth?," Foucault pointed out that "Since Nietzsche, this question of truth has been transformed," and is now

⁴⁷ It is important to note that Foucault's emphatic turn to practices—his centering of the voices of the marginalized and oppressed—as the cardinal work of the intellectual, was not, for lack of better words, original. For instance, these kinds of claims were made, and put into practice, in the World War II-era work and extensive writings of the "Johnson-Forest tendency," a subgroup that developed within the Workers Party (a third camp Trotskyist group in the U.S.) formed by C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya (under the pseudonyms Johnson and Forest) and Grace Lee Boggs. See (James 1993).

⁴⁸ (McWhorter 2016).

⁴⁹ Foucault, "Le grand enferment" (1971) in (Foucault 2001a), No. 105, p. 1169. See also (McWhorter 2016, p. 23).

⁵⁰ (McWhorter 2016, p. 24). Here, McWhorter cites Foucault, "La grand enferment," pp. 1169, 1173, and (Foucault 1988).

⁵¹ (McWhorter 2016, p. 25).

⁵² (McWhorter 2016, p. 25).

⁵³ (Hadot 1995, p. 265).

⁵⁴ (DeHart 2006, p. 97). "As he [Lindbeck] put it," DeHart continues, 'Instead of re-describing the faith in new concepts, it seeks to teach the language and practices of the religion to potential adherents.' (ND 132).

⁵⁵ (Winner 2018, pp. 203–4) (endnote 4).

“What is the hazardous career that Truth has followed?”⁵⁶ Whereas the turn to practices in theology presumes and pursues a clear path of truth, for Foucault, practices—and the Hadotian practice of philosophy itself—reveal and reflect a “history of the will to truth,” of how “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.”⁵⁷ Foucault’s concern was with how truth is produced and produces a particular field of knowledge, an episteme, and how that episteme is related “to the processes of historical practice.”⁵⁸ This kind of methodological analysis, what he referred to as archaeology, recognizes how truth “is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power,” and in turn traces and *critically examines* that production.⁵⁹ While the theological turn to practices outlined above indeed critically examines how truth was produced and functioned within modernity, it fails to apply that same critical examination to how truth is produced in relation to power within their own methodological turns to practice.

However, for Foucault this critical archaeological turn was, ultimately, not enough. McWhorter suggests that Foucault’s reassessment of philosophy and understanding of the relationship between philosophy and political activism was also shaped by what he saw to be the political failure of the GIP.⁶⁰ By the end of 1972, less than two years after it formed, the GIP disbanded. While it led to the establishment of another organization of those currently and formerly incarcerated, Comité d’action des prisonniers (the Prisoners Action Committee [CAP]), Foucault “had the impression that it had been useless.”⁶¹ French sociologist and fellow GIP member (and, incidentally, Foucault’s partner until his death in 1984) Daniel Defert had a similar conclusion, commenting that the efforts of intellectuals in the GIP to subvert their own position of knowledge and power was ultimately “a failure.”⁶² Reflecting on this failure and the lessons gleaned from it, McWhorter writes:

Effective political work is usually slow and frequently boring. The field of action must be continually reassessed and strategies and tactics, and sometimes even goals, rethought again and again in order to build the capacity for sufficient force to be generated in precisely the right locations at just the right times. A network of force relations must be constructed to counter the network under contestation and eventually to subvert it. I venture to say Foucault’s experience with the GIP taught him this and led him to rethink activism along with philosophy.⁶³

McWhorter suggests that this analysis of failure shaped Foucault’s subsequent reflection, impacting Foucault’s turn to genealogy, a “coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics.”⁶⁴ Genealogy, she explains, “facilitates the construction of that counter-network of force relations” and “unlike the GIP (at least in Foucault’s own estimation), genealogy does have destabilizing effects on institutional structures.”⁶⁵

⁵⁶ (Foucault 1980, p. 66).

⁵⁷ (Foucault 1981, p. 52).

⁵⁸ (Foucault 1972, p. 192).

⁵⁹ (Foucault 1980, p. 131).

⁶⁰ See (McWhorter 2016, pp. 31–32).

⁶¹ (Deleuze 2007, p. 282; McWhorter 2016, p. 32 (en46)).

⁶² (Defert 2003, p. 318). This text was translated by Perry Zurn, see (Zurn and Dilts 2016, p. 6 (en21)).

⁶³ (McWhorter 2016, p. 32). McWhorter also points to (Hoffman 2014, pp. 47–92), which notes a similar transformation in the 1970s with regard to activism and the conception of power on models of war (see en49).

⁶⁴ (Foucault 2003, p. 8). See also (McWhorter 2016, p. 33). Elsewhere, McWhorter succinctly defines genealogy as “a critical redescription of a dominant description,” a process that turns to historical archives to explore and open up other forms and modes of thinking, doing, and being. See (McWhorter 1999, p. 43).

⁶⁵ (McWhorter 2016, p. 33). McWhorter turned to an interview exchange Foucault had on the impact of *Discipline and Punish*, and notes that “In this interview, at least, Foucault seems to believe that *Discipline and Punish* did what he wanted it to do; the genealogy was effective” (p. 33).

Whereas archaeology investigates the production of discourse, examining the history of the will to truth, genealogy turns its attention to *resistance* to dominant forms of discourse, found in, through, and by “the insurrection of subjugated knowledges.”⁶⁶ Rather than turning only to established knowledges and practices as a source, Foucault turns to subjugated knowledges—knowledge that has been disqualified as proper knowledge, deemed as insufficiently conceptual, unscientific, or naïve, including experiential knowledge such as that had by prisoners, psychiatric patients, and the like, as well as knowledge buried in obscurity, perhaps intentionally, that is found in archives.⁶⁷ Not only was critical analysis of the relation between knowledges, practices, truth, and power vital, but constructive engagement with—an illumination and elevation of—subjugated knowledges was imperative. “It would seem, then, that the lesson Foucault learned from what he saw as the GIP’s failure and from continued meditation on philosophy as a discipline and practice,” McWhorter surmises, “was that the political work that he *could* do effectively was that of a specific intellectual using his scholarly expertise to make available knowledges of struggles subjugated in obscure archives for alliances with the knowledges voiced by those whom the dominant knowledge regime discredits.”⁶⁸

In his essay on Foucault, Black Feminism, and “the Intimacy of Abolition,” Stephen Dillon writes that, for the GIP, the “issue was not necessarily a lack of knowledge, but the production of knowledge. The prison’s violence was known in ‘circumscribed milieus,’ but the prisoner’s voice was silenced, hidden, and subjugated. For them, there was a truth that lies within what has been erased, destroyed, and rendered invisible.”⁶⁹ Both through and subsequent to his work with the GIP, Foucault critically analyzed and challenged a binary inside–outside logic, demonstrating how this logic relied on and reproduced dominant power/knowledge that functioned to further subjugate and oppress. To rely on the “already-known,” on given, “inside” knowledge and practices, not only reveals the limits of one’s own epistemological and moral imagination—“the limitation of our own [system of thought], the stark impossibility of thinking *that*”—it also is to presume and perpetuate a “power-effect.”⁷⁰

McWhorter ends her essay on “The Abolition of Philosophy” by bringing Foucault’s insights to bear on the discipline of philosophy in contemporary North America. Reflecting on the ongoing “declarations of philosophy’s ill-health and death lifted out of scholarly journals, the popular press, and nowadays philosophical blogs,” declarations, one might add, that are reflected in hand-wringing about the humanities writ large, McWhorter suggests that “perhaps it is the metaphor that is at fault, not the basic observation.”⁷¹ Pointing to reflections on philosophy’s “lack of attention to political and ethical life,” McWhorter argues that the “problem is not that *philosophy* is irrelevant; the problem is either that what is happening in the profession is not philosophy, or that the way of life it exemplifies has no appeal.”⁷² Applying McWhorter’s claims to theology, one could argue that, in many ways, the theological turn to practices is not indicted in this critique—the turn has indeed attended to political and ethical life, and has sought to, and in many ways succeeded in, envisioning and embodying theology as a way of, and “recommendation for,” life.⁷³ Yet, Foucault’s work with and reflection on the GIP is nonetheless instructive here.

The theological turn to practices has stifled, and failed to export, its moral imagination by failing to turn critique inwards and epistemologically and ethically address the damages of Christian practice. It has by-and-large ignored the work of feminist and African American theologians who have critically examined the patriarchal and white Supremacist logics embedded within Christian

⁶⁶ (Foucault 2003, p. 7).

⁶⁷ (Foucault 2003, p. 7).

⁶⁸ (McWhorter 2016, p. 34).

⁶⁹ (Dillon 2016, p. 263).

⁷⁰ (Foucault 1989, p. xvi; Foucault 2003, p. 9). As McWhorter puts it, “the ‘already known’ is a ‘power-effect’ that denies itself as such and that sustains its power through that sustained denial” (McWhorter 2016, p. 33).

⁷¹ (McWhorter 2016, p. 35).

⁷² (McWhorter 2016, p. 36).

⁷³ (Coakley 2013, p. 18).

thought and practice. Mary Daly, for instance, reflected at length on how Christianity is one of the “infrastructures of the edifice of patriarchy,” manifested through its symbolics (the “symbol of the Father God”), and its soteriology and ethics (the idealization of sacrificial love and passive acceptance of suffering, particularly amongst and for women), to note just a few of the many examples she gives.⁷⁴ Similarly, throughout his oeuvre, James Cone traced how “American theology . . . has largely ignored its domestic problem on race.”⁷⁵ Charting how “one’s social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to the questions,” Cone pointed out how, despite evidencing, and in some ways attending to, the problems of modernity, “twentieth-century white theologians are still secure in their assumption that important theological issues emerge, primarily if not exclusively, out of the white experience.”⁷⁶ “White theology,” Cone told the *New York Times* in 1969, “is basically racist and non-Christian.”⁷⁷ Following Cone, theologians like J. Kameron Carter and Willie Jennings have recently pointed to the ways that the Christian social imagination has been “woven into processes of cultural domination,” demonstrating how theological discourse has undergirded the production of the self-disciplining racialized subject, and how this “pseudoteology” has been disseminated through Christian theology and practice.⁷⁸ A number of postcolonial and decolonial theologians and theorists have also pointed to how the “colonial matrix of power, put in place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was framed in and by Christian theology.”⁷⁹ Given this history, and these omissions of that history, and given the often-justified cultural perceptions of Christianity as hypocritical and judgmental, this way of life may indeed have little to no appeal.⁸⁰

As the previous section highlighted, the turn to practices that stemmed in large part from the work of George Lindbeck developed from “the question of how theology can creatively rethink the Christian tradition and yet *contribute to the maintenance of its identity*.”⁸¹ The future, the survival, of the church motivated Lindbeck’s approach—his methodological turn to the practices stemmed from an effort to preserve a unified Christian identity amidst an increasingly pluralist and secular society, and thus sought effective Christian witness within such a society in order to preserve and maintain it into the future.⁸² This aim indelibly influenced the overwhelmingly positive turn to practices, as well as the limited scope of practices considered—in seeking to secure Christianity’s/the church’s future, the turn to practices foreclosed on the possibilities of moral imagination available to it in and through both self-critique and a more capacious understanding of practices.

In light of the impending, somehow ongoing, “death” of philosophy, and the failures of philosophical reflection that perhaps led it there, McWhorter reflects on the prospects of philosophy’s future, and offers a suggestion. “Instead of focusing on resisting eradication from the academy,” she proposes, “perhaps philosophy should seek refuge outside it.”⁸³ Here, McWhorter’s indictment and subsequent proposal is relevant. To consider a corollary: in a letter to the Jewish philosopher and sociologist Jacob Taubes, Carl Schmitt—the German jurist and political theorist whose work formed the field of political theology—remarked that “today, everything is theology, with the exception of what the theologians talk about.”⁸⁴ Schmitt’s remark points to the ways theologians have failed to adequately reflect on and speak to the world around them. What might it mean for theology to turn to

⁷⁴ (Daly 1978, p. 39; Daly 1973, pp. 13, 77).

⁷⁵ (Cone 1969, p. 84).

⁷⁶ (Cone 1975, pp. 14, 43).

⁷⁷ See (Smith 2017).

⁷⁸ (Jennings 2011, p. 6; Carter 2008, pp. 6, 44, 127). Throughout *Race*, Carter explores in great detail how a pseudoteology lies at the infrastructure of a problematic production of racialized subjects.

⁷⁹ (Mignolo 2011, p. 27).

⁸⁰ (Kinnaman and Lyons 2012); see endnote 43 above.

⁸¹ (DeHart 2006, p. xiii), emphasis mine.

⁸² See (DeHart 2006), Chp. Two (pp. 57–100), especially the section on “Orthodoxy and Society after Christendom,” pp. 57–66.

⁸³ (McWhorter 2016, p. 36).

⁸⁴ In a letter to Armin Mohler, August 14, 1958. In (Taubes 2013, p. 26).

Christian practices in a way that recognizes their damage, as well as to consider and attend to practices that are not typically considered Christian? To “struggle over knowledge,” Stephen Dillion writes, “was central to how Foucault and the GIP understood abolition. For them, *abolition was a material and epistemological process.*”⁸⁵ What might it mean, and look like, for a theological turn to practices to inhabit self-critical reflection in its epistemological presumptions, to risk, perhaps even pursue, its *own* abolition—to embrace an *abolitionist* imagination through a negative, critical, turn to practices? And what might doing so look like within theological reflection on prisons? In the next, final section of this essay, I consider these questions, offering a comparative analysis of two different theological turns to practices that address prison, and, in light of that analysis, calling for a theological genealogy of oppression, of, and about, prisons.

4. Towards a *Theological Genealogy of Oppression, of and about Prisons: A Comparative Case Study*

Perhaps the key methodological question is not what method have you adopted for this research? But what paths have been disavowed, left behind, covered over and remain unseen?

———Avery Gordon⁸⁶

The problem is not a model prison or the abolition of prisons. Currently, in our system, marginalization is effected by prisons. This marginalization will not automatically disappear by abolishing the prison. Society would quite simply institute another means. The problem is the following: to offer a critique of the system that explains the process by which contemporary society pushes a portion of the population to the margins. Voila.

———Michel Foucault⁸⁷

One of the most prominent—or, as Lauren Winner puts it, “audacious”—turns to practice in recent theology has been the work of Sarah Coakley.⁸⁸ While Coakley, an English Anglican theologian, is not a descendant of Yale School postliberalism, her turn to practices shares much in common with Lindbeck, on (at least) three fronts. First, like Lindbeck and other postliberal thinkers, Coakley turns to practices as both a methodological and ethical resource.⁸⁹ The method she proposes and outlines in her book, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, is one that “keeps ethics, doctrine, and spiritual practice tightly wound together.”⁹⁰ This method, which she calls “*théologie totale*” is rooted in what Coakley understands to be a “contemporary trinitarian *ontology of desire*—a vision of God’s trinitarian nature as both the source and goal of human desires, as God intends them.”⁹¹ It is in light of this ontology of desire that “ethics and metaphysics may be found to converge” and “divine desire can be seen as the ultimate progenitor of human desire, and the very means of its transformation.”⁹² At the heart of *théologie totale* for Coakley is contemplative prayer, a bodily and spiritual practice that re-forms desire by and through the Spirit. This practice, importantly, attends to “the epistemological task” of theology, “of cleansing, reordering, and redirecting the apparatuses of one’s own thinking, desiring, and seeing.”⁹³

⁸⁵ (Dillon 2016, p. 271), emphasis mine.

⁸⁶ (Gordon 2008, p. 41).

⁸⁷ Michel Foucault, “Le grand enfermement” (1971) in (Foucault 2001a), No. 105, p. 1174.

⁸⁸ (Winner 2018, p. 177).

⁸⁹ Whereas theologians like Paul DeHart and Kathryn Tanner have illuminated the ways that Lindbeck’s postliberal frame reflected and engendered ethical commitments, and in doing so blurred the methodological aims of his work, Coakley’s project is overt in connecting methodology and ethics.

⁹⁰ (Coakley 2013, p. 87).

⁹¹ (Coakley 2013, pp. 27, 34–35) (en2); 5. In this vision and account, “God the ‘Father’, in and through the Spirit, both stirs up and progressively chastens and purges, the frailer and often misdirected desires of humans, and so forges them, by stages of sometimes painful growth, into the likeness of his Son” (5). This trinitarian doctrine of God for Coakley marks both the ontological foundation of desire and its ideal telos.

⁹² (Coakley 2013, p. 5).

⁹³ (Coakley 2013, p. 20).

In her turn to contemplative prayer, Coakley's *théologie totale* also shares with Lindbeck's account an effort to move beyond modern Enlightenment-based approaches to theology. Given this ontology of desire and the epistemological task of theology that is shaped through contemplative prayer, "an Enlightenment-style appeal to a shared universal 'reason' can no longer provide an uncontentious basis for the adjudication of competing theological claims."⁹⁴ As a practice that "inculcates mental patterns of 'unmastery,'" contemplative prayer thus also functions for Coakley as a "methodological defense" that "protects *théologie totale* from the critique that systematics will collapse into hegemony."⁹⁵ Finally, like Lindbeck's postliberalism, while *théologie totale* seeks a way beyond Enlightenment approaches to theology, it does so in a way that, through turning to practices, offers a third, middle way, one that moves beyond both propositionalism and revisionism, beyond either a rejection of faith in favor of science and secular knowledges or a rejection of science and secular knowledges in favor of faith—a "way between and beyond [these] false choices above can be made with the aid of a contemplative *théologie totale*, Coakley asserts.⁹⁶ In engaging and re-forming desire, *théologie totale* necessarily "spirals out to acknowledge the messy complexity of the entanglement of the secular and spiritual realms for those who dare to practice it."⁹⁷ The method of *théologie totale*, Coakley explains, "is not only founded in ascetic practices of attention, but also rooted in an exploration of the many mediums and levels at which theological truth may be engaged."⁹⁸ Because it "purges and unifies the engaged theologian's faculties," *théologie totale* can "dig down the social tell of doctrine," drawing on resources from the social sciences and other secular knowledges in order to do so.⁹⁹

Despite her claims that contemplation, in reorienting our desires, epistemologically and methodologically "inculcates mental patterns of 'un-mastery'" thus countermanding hegemony, and ethically "opens up a radical attention to the 'other,'" in "offer[ing] a reading of pristine and pristinating practice," Coakley undermines the very aims she seeks, and stifles the kind of moral imagination that she hopes to engender.¹⁰⁰ Like Lindbeckian postliberalism, *théologie totale* offers a narrow vision of Christian practices, explores only the positive effects of practice (and puts enormous faith in what such practices can accomplish), and presumes and reproduces an insider–outsider logic that reifies dominant knowledges and power structures. The turn to Christian practices—in Coakley's case, to contemplative prayer specifically—by not attending to the ethical or epistemic failures and limits engendered by the Fall, does not resist mastery and hegemony, but merely displaces it from rational propositional claims to the practices themselves, as they are understood within a particular theological frame.¹⁰¹ Coakley, for instance, argues that "if one is resolutely *not* engaged in the practices of prayer, contemplation, and worship, then there are certain sorts of philosophical insight that are unlikely, if

⁹⁴ (Coakley 2013, p. 16).

⁹⁵ (Coakley 2013, p. 43; Winner 2018, p. 178). Contemplating God as "the source and sustainer of all being," Coakley explains, means understanding "the dizzying mystery encountered in the act of contemplation as precisely the 'blinking' of the human ambition to knowledge, control, and mastery." Through this 'blinking,' prayer enables us to better see and understand the connections between sexuality and God, as "divine desire [is] the ultimate progenitor of human desire, and the very means of its transformation" (Coakley 2013, pp. 6, 44).

⁹⁶ (Coakley 2013, p. 78). Coakley outlines this at length in chapter two of *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, "Doing Theology on Wigan Pier? Or Why Feminism and the Social Sciences Matter to Theology," pp. 66–99.

⁹⁷ (Coakley 2013, p. 69).

⁹⁸ (Coakley 2013, p. 48). She continues, explaining that it "is in this sense that it deserves the appellation *totale*: not as a totalizing assault on worldly power, but as an attempt to do justice to every level, and type, of religious apprehension and its appropriate mode of expression" (p. 48).

⁹⁹ (Coakley 2013, p. 76).

¹⁰⁰ (Coakley 2013, p. 43; Winner 2018, p. 177).

¹⁰¹ Coakley does briefly address those who might imply that her "appeal to Christian contemplation is an insidious new 'hegemonic' move, replacing doctrinal supersessionism with a more covert supersessionism of practice" (p. 86). Her analysis of what fuels this critique, however, "the presumption that religious 'practice' is precisely what engenders and mandates a sectarian *withdrawal* from public commitments and shared projects," is misplaced. Ironically, Coakley performs the inverse of what she critiques about the non-Christian religious response. The critique of the hegemony of practices, at least the one that I am leveling here, is not fueled by concerns that religious practices demand withdrawal; rather, the contention is with the claim that *only* religious practices can invoke certain insights or enable certain virtues.

not impossible, to become available to one.”¹⁰² Specific Christian practices are necessary, not only for theology, but for philosophy and other secular knowledges as well.¹⁰³ Contemplation enables engagement with, and at times critique of, secular knowledges, but there is no accompanying or inverse critique of contemplation or the theological frame that undergirds it.

Applying and performing the relevance of *théologie totale*, including its engagement with the social sciences, Coakley offers a “critical testing of its contemporary veracity ‘in the field,’” pursuing, through qualitative ethnography, “fieldwork analysis of two contemporary Christian groups themselves deeply invested in the life of prayer.”¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, while not explicitly addressed within *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, Coakley also does a kind of fieldwork in a jail, a topic she addresses in an article in the *Christian Century*.¹⁰⁵ Coakley’s experience working for a semester as an assistant chaplain at the Suffolk County House of Correction, where she spent an hour each week teaching and leading a practice of silent contemplative prayer to a group of incarcerated men, reflects—and may have in some ways helped shape—her *théologie totale*, and is illustrative of the limits and critiques of this positive turn to practices and the moral imagination that, I am arguing, such a turn does (and/or does not) engender.

The “ascetic practices of contemplation are themselves indispensable means of a *true* attentiveness to the despised or marginalized ‘other,’” Coakley asserts.¹⁰⁶ “It is easy, from a privileged position, to be morally righteous about justice for the oppressed, while actually drowning out their voices with the din of one’s own high-sounding plans for reform,” she points out—it is the “moral and epistemic stripping that is endemic to the act of contemplation” that “inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions.”¹⁰⁷ Yet, Coakley’s own reflections on her work at Suffolk County prison do not seem to evidence the kind of attentive to otherness and justice for the oppressed that she suggests *théologie totale* inculcates and induces.¹⁰⁸

In her assessment of Coakley’s attentiveness to the other, in the context of a broader critique of Coakley’s trinitarian theology and account of the God–world relation, Linn Tonstad turns to Coakley’s fieldwork in the prison as a salient example.¹⁰⁹ Tonstad rightly and persuasively points to how Coakley’s “descriptions of the prisoners and her reactions to them are worrisome,” as Coakley speaks of surprise at having not felt under threat or experiencing sexualized remarks (yet reads this as potentially only “beginners luck,”) and at the insight of a “bright and articulate Latino-American prisoner” who had “instinctively grasped” how asceticism worked.¹¹⁰ Tonstad points out how not

¹⁰² (Coakley 2013, p. 16).

¹⁰³ Coakley also argues that contemplative practice offers necessary insights and correctives to secular gender theory. The academic and sociological pursuit of gender equality, Coakley argues, “is—to say the least—an exercise of historical, religious and political sophistication, requiring distinctive spiritual strengths of self-knowledge and humility. It is not, then, a task best accomplished by a divestment from religious practices and traditions, as is still assumed in dominant ‘secular’ circles: on the contrary, it may be that contemplative religious practices of ‘effacement’ are precisely the enabling incubus for such reconsideration” (Coakley 2013, p. 80).

¹⁰⁴ (Coakley 2013, p. 11). For her account of this fieldwork, see Chapter Four, “The charismatic constituency: embarrassment or riches?” pp. 152–89.

¹⁰⁵ (Coakley 2004b). Coakley also very briefly recounts her experience as an assistant prison chaplain in (Coakley 2004a). This fieldwork will also likely be a site of reflection and analysis in the third volume of Coakley’s systematic theology (*God, Sexuality, and the Self* is the first volume of this larger systematic project), *Punish and Heal*, which “will address the public realm of the polis with its secular institutions of prison and hospital, and so re-examine the doctrines of sin and atonement” (Coakley 2013, p. xv).

¹⁰⁶ (Coakley 2013, p. 47).

¹⁰⁷ (Coakley 2013, pp. 47–48).

¹⁰⁸ This is not to suggest that all turns to Christian practices such as prayer are subject to these same critiques, but rather, that the methodological and epistemological presuppositions within theological turns to practices be a subject of closer scrutiny—that a methodological turn to practices does not inevitably, of necessity, engender openness to otherness or eliminate the risks of mastery, and that the relationship between methodological turns to practices and ethics is not unidirectional. That is, while spiritual practices have the potential to engender liberative effects and can be sites from where critique occurs, they also carry the risk of causing and continuing harm, and can also be the subject of critique. For more on these kinds of approaches to Christian practices, see, for instance (Prevot 2015; Grimes 2017).

¹⁰⁹ See Chapter 3, “Speaking ‘Father Rightly’: Kenotic Reformation into Sonship in Sarah Coakley,” in (Tonstad 2015, pp. 98–132), particularly the subsection on “Attentiveness to the other,” pp. 118–21.

¹¹⁰ (Tonstad 2015, p. 119; Coakley 2004b, p. 19).

only are Coakley's assumptions about the incarcerated men and their "violent and criminal capacities" not in and of themselves reflective of an openness to difference and otherness, but moreover, "she fails to reckon too with a deeper challenge the experience poses to her thesis regarding sociopolitical transformation."¹¹¹ In pointing to how the prisoners become calmer and less resistant after learning the practices of silent prayer, and reading that as a support of her thesis, Coakley fails to attend to the broader sociopolitical realities that she suggests her program impacts, turning instead to contemplative prayer as a kind of resource for docility in the face of injustice. *Théologie totale* here reinforces hegemonic power structures rather than upending them.

Notably absent from Coakley's analysis is any reflection on the prison industrial complex or the structural, systemic, racial-economic injustices that created and sustain it, let alone any reflection on how Christian practices such as contemplative prayer might, however misguidedly, function to reinforce those injustices—or, for that matter, on how or what practices might engender *resistance* to and in light of such injustices.¹¹² "The transformations the pray-er undergoes should not bring with them silence in the face of oppression and injustice," Tonstad writes. "Silent waiting on God should not lead to complacency in the face of evil, and neither ought it to entail acceptance of pain and suffering grounded in injustice rather than in the painful justice of God."¹¹³ "To conform prisoners more thoroughly to the parody of nonviolence required by the prison arguably belies rather than supports Coakley's thesis regarding the sociopolitical effects of contemplative prayer," Tonstad concludes.¹¹⁴ Within Coakley's own examples, contemplation does not engender the openness to otherness that she argues that it does. Rather, Coakley sees the prisoners as the prison system itself sees them, as always already guilty, as delinquent. This positive turn to practices both epistemically and ethically reinforces an insider–outsider binary.

What, alternatively, might a more self-critical theological turn to practices, one that embraces an abolitionist imagination even at the risk of its own abolition, look like? In her book *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*, Sharon Welch offers a useful frame for such an alternative. Drawing on liberation theology and Foucauldian methodology, Welch proposes a feminist theology of liberation that is cognizant of and attentive to her own social location as a white woman—as both oppressor and oppressed—as well as of the perils and possibilities of theology within and in light of modernity.

Welch, significantly, begins not with her constructive theological proposal or with outlining what theology might offer. Rather, she foregrounds her theology by addressing both the conceptual and moral inadequacies and limits of Christian theology and faith.¹¹⁵ Drawing on liberation theologians like Jon Sobrino, for whom "the question of truth was a question of *practice*," and on "revisionist" theologians like Gordon Kaufman, she highlights how Christian practices and theologies have not only often failed to adequately respond to social injustices, but have often contributed to them.¹¹⁶ "What is the rationality of a faith that blinds while using the language of final revelation?," she asks, and what "is the meaning of doctrines and symbols that claim to reveal ultimate truth about human life but are in that life the correlates of structures of oppression, exploitation, and terror?"¹¹⁷ Welch seeks not only to uplift or elevate Christianity through a turn to practices, but "to *understand* Christianity

¹¹¹ (Tonstad 2015, p. 120; Coakley 2004b, p. 21).

¹¹² Coakley does briefly mention that "the more cynical views of repressive power proposed by Michel Foucault in relation to prison and asylum [cannot] go without a Christian theological response," hinting that her future volume of her systematic theology on sin and atonement that addresses the institution of prison will engage with Foucault's work on these topics (Coakley 2004b, p. 21). Yet her reading of Foucault's writings on prison as "cynical" leave me cautious, and her reference to Foucault's analysis of power as "repressive" seems to misread/overlook Foucault's claims of power as productive and subjectivizing.

¹¹³ (Tonstad 2015, p. 118).

¹¹⁴ (Tonstad 2015, p. 120).

¹¹⁵ See (Welch 1985, pp. 1–14), Chapter 1, "The Fundamental Crisis in Christian Theology".

¹¹⁶ (Welch 1985, p. 7), emphasis mine. See also (Sobrino 1980; Kaufman 1983).

¹¹⁷ (Welch 1985, p. 6).

in terms of its practices,” looking at both positive and negative outcomes.¹¹⁸ She pursues this by drawing on liberation theology and Foucauldian genealogy, charting a descriptive correspondence between their respective methods and presuppositions. Both, importantly, emphasize the “power and peril of discourse”—the “uncertainty faced when we suspect the conflicts, triumphs, injuries, dominations, and enslavements that lie behind these words, even when long use has chipped away their rough edges.”¹¹⁹ She points to theologians like Mary Daly and James Cone, who are “among those who have exposed this dimension of theological discourse, the conflicts and dominations that lie behind the victory of orthodoxy.”¹²⁰ Welch is critical of the way that “methodological difficulties in theology” function as “part of an elision of discourse,” failing to acknowledge their own tenuousness and obscuring the ways that power manifests in and through method to uphold and (re-)produce dominance.¹²¹ While Welch begins by attending to these dangers and failures within theologies and practices (and theological turns *to* practices), her outlook is not a cynical one.

For Welch, both liberation theology and Foucauldian genealogy are significant in that they not only “disclose memories of conflict” that theologies, especially through their methodologies, elide, they also “recover suppressed knowledge,” and release memories of subjugation and the content of suppressed knowledge into a struggle with dominant knowledge—pursuing, through genealogy, the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges.”¹²² This aligns with the aims of liberation theology, Welch explains: “Genealogy is a mode of investigation appropriate for a theology that understands Christian faith as a commitment to eradicate oppression and to establish justice, and understands theology as the analysis of the conditions and motives of such work for justice.”¹²³ In pursuing justice and liberation as its aims, rather than a securing of its own future, theology of this sort must necessarily subject itself to critique, but in doing so, also, paradoxically, taps into the richness of its own moral imagination—in attending to the perils of and within theology, theology’s power and potential are also made manifest and enriched.

Throughout *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*, Welch turns to examples within Foucault’s work to illustrate and better explain the Foucauldian concepts she draws upon. On more than one occasion, the examples she turns to are from Foucault’s own analyses of prison—she turns to the “example of penology,” for instance, to illustrate the interrelation between discourse and nondiscursive practices (i.e., social systems, class divisions, institutions) in Foucault’s account of power/knowledge, and to illuminate the limits of ideology critique and its differences from a genealogical approach.¹²⁴ To illustrate the genealogical method, Welch concludes her penultimate chapter on strategic knowledges by summarizing Foucault’s genealogical interrogation of the Gulag, the site and system of imprisonment of political dissidents in the Soviet Union, in order to “indicate the contours of a complete genealogy.”¹²⁵ In outlining how Foucault’s genealogy, via “the Gulag question,” challenges theoretical and historicist reductions and utopian and universalizing dissolutions, Welch suggests various corollaries of these respective reductions and dissolutions within Christian theology.¹²⁶ Welch’s summary, her outline of a genealogy of oppression, is instructive, and to conclude this section, I briefly retrace it, applying both Foucault’s and Welch’s insights to consider what

¹¹⁸ (Welch 1985, p. 18). See also the first epigraph of this essay.

¹¹⁹ (Welch 1985, pp. 29, 30). Welch, in the latter citation, is quoting (Foucault 1979, p. 216).

¹²⁰ (Welch 1985, p. 30). See also endnotes 73–76 above.

¹²¹ (Welch 1985, p. 32).

¹²² (Welch 1985, p. 55; Foucault 2003, p. 7). Foucault’s reflections on the insurrection of subjugated knowledges—the contents of which are found in his January 1976 lectures at the Collège de France, which were published in full in English in 2003 (see endnote 63 above)—also appear in *Power/Knowledge*, which is the text that Welch, writing in the 1980s, references, See (Foucault 1980), “Two Lectures,” pp. 78–108. See also endnotes 65 and 66 above.

¹²³ (Welch 1985, p. 20).

¹²⁴ See (Welch 1985) “Power and Discourse: The Example of Penology,” pp. 15–19; “Power and Ideology,” pp. 61–64.

¹²⁵ (Welch 1985) “A Genealogy of Oppression,” pp. 67–73. Foucault’s analysis of the Gulag’s relation to modern carceral punishment and power—his attempt to situate the Gulag historically and culturally—shifted throughout the course of his analyses. For more on this, see (Plamper 2002).

¹²⁶ (Foucault 1980, p. 137).

the contours of a theological genealogy of oppression, of and about prisons, might look like, with a critical eye towards theological turns to practices. This retraversal is by no means a genealogy in its own right—that would demand the foregrounding and elevation of local memories, it would need to arise from those on the inside, from those who bear the effects of the violence and indignities of incarceration—but rather calls *for* and gestures towards such kind of methodological reflection, and considers what it might mean and look like to pursue such a task.¹²⁷

Foucault's first challenge of accounts of the Gulag is that of *theoretical reduction*, "the attempt to understand the Gulag system as an error, a betrayal of the theory of Marx and Lenin."¹²⁸ One must in fact, Foucault explains, question these theoretical texts "from the standpoint of the reality of the Gulag. Rather than of searching in those texts for a condemnation in advance of the Gulag, it is a matter of asking what in those texts could have made the Gulag possible, what might even now continue to justify it, and what makes its intolerable truths still accepted today."¹²⁹ Practice, Foucault argues, is not to be seen as an aberration of or from theory, but as a consequence or aspect of it. Welch points out that this "type of questioning also characterizes feminist theology" that asks "what it is about Christian faith itself that makes the oppression of women actual in history."¹³⁰ Rather than focusing on how practices might rightly and positively reflect Christian theological claims, and how practices might resist and subvert oppressive functions of the prison system, what might it mean to look at and critically examine how Christian practices and theological frames have also functioned to support it? This reduction in particular has been what this essay has sought to challenge.

What, then, of the other challenges Foucault makes of the Gulag question? The other reduction Foucauldian genealogy resists is *historicist reduction*, which "restrict[s] one's questioning to the level of cause."¹³¹ To seek to identify the "cause" of the Gulag, be it the bureaucratization of the communist party, or the economic troubles of the Soviet Union, Foucault explains, "is to think of the Gulag only negatively, as an obstacle to be removed, a dysfunctioning to be rectified. The Gulag question," rather, "has to be posed in positive terms . . . what use is the Gulag, what functions does it assure, in what strategies is it integrated?"¹³² This challenge, Welch admits, has "wide implications for liberation theology," as "[f]ollowing this line of argument would dispel any tendencies to focus on ideological uses or distortions of the Christian tradition."¹³³ The turn to practice in theology, as I outline above, tend to offer practices as a corrective response to problematic distortions within the tradition.¹³⁴ Yet, in doing so, they obscure the *functions* of these moments and movements (these "distortions") within the tradition, and in offering practices as an alternative, risk reperforming those same functions, merely dressed in different garb.

This challenge also has wide implications for many theological critiques and analyses of mass incarceration, a good number of which draw on liberationist theologies, that often lift up different ideological distortions of theological claims or practices—of our doctrines of atonement, of our conceptions of divine justice, of our ethical frameworks, etc.—and suggest corrections of those

¹²⁷ In this way, this essay draws on the methodological and ethical *turns to* practices as a resource for Christian theology, and through doing so, recognizes and aims to highlight the limits and necessary conditions that must precede and accompany reflection on and claims about actual practices. And as Andrew Dilts points out in "Toward Abolitionist Genealogy," this kind of genealogical work *is* already being done by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated theorists, and is largely overlooked, seen as not theoretical or as mere data for subsequent analysis. What does it mean, he asks, "if we fail to include some of the most astute critical historians and genealogists that we have, whose genealogically work is in the service of liberation. Theirs and ours. How can we continue to explain ourselves without them" (p. 53)? Critiques of the "native informant" are also instructive here; see, for instance, (Spivak 1999).

¹²⁸ (Welch 1985, p. 67).

¹²⁹ (Foucault 1980, p. 135).

¹³⁰ (Welch 1985, p. 68).

¹³¹ (Foucault 1980, p. 135).

¹³² (Foucault 1980, pp. 135–36).

¹³³ (Welch 1985, p. 69).

¹³⁴ Coakley, for instance, speaks of "the modern problem of the dissociation of theology from practices of un-mastery," and explores the causes of the distrust of systematic theology and how that distrust might be addressed with "the aid of the insights of a contemplative *théologie totale*" (Coakley 2013, pp. 43, 45).

distortions as potential solvents.¹³⁵ These theological analyses hold much merit, and offer a great deal to the scholarship, and resultant practices, addressing mass incarceration. Yet, as Welch points out, even though “such causes may be operative, this type of analysis becomes reductionist if the positive functions of the oppressive aspects of the tradition are not addressed.”¹³⁶ While some of these theological accounts do indeed turn to the deeper function of these distortions, there is nevertheless much work to be done still on this front.

In addition to the reductions that Foucauldian genealogy challenges, it also critiques and refuses potential dissolutions, evasions that manifest in our methods and analyses. The *universalizing dissolution*, Foucault explains, abstracts and, as the descriptor suggests, universalizes a problem rather than addressing the specifics of its manifestations. “The Gulag is not a question to be posed for any and every country,” Foucault asserts, and analyses that abstract to contend with the general problem of internment will fail to address the Gulag in its specificity.¹³⁷ While the turn to practices in theology might appear at first glance to avoid this particular evasion by focusing on the particularity of Christian practices, as my above discussion on Lindbeck points out, operant within this Christian particularity is its own kind of universality—a unified, singular vision of Christian practice, interpretation, and community. As Kathryn Tanner points out, this reading of distinctive Christian culture as an “independently generated whole” presumes and performs a kind of universalizing, as it “prejudge[s] the nature of the Christian social practices within which theology is lodged.”¹³⁸ For Tanner, postmodern anthropological scholarship on culture reveals the inadequacies, and impossibilities, of any kind of universalizing of Christian practices—the “meaning of a Christian belief may have a fairly definite sense in an established context of uses to which it is put, but that meaning presents no absolute standard that predetermines future uses.”¹³⁹ This has deep implications for theological turns to practice. What might it mean to consider practices in their contextual specificity, rather than highlighting the universal value of specific practices? The practice of contemplative prayer, for instance, may undoubtedly hold much value for the “liberal Protestant Harvard students” that Coakley encountered and taught—their very “suspicion” of it may in fact be illustrative of the transformative potential of such silent reflection and the submission to God it engenders—but perhaps may not be the most life-giving practice in the context of a prison system that functions to produce docility and submissiveness, as it may reify and reward the stifling subjugation and conformity that the prison system inflicts on those incarcerated.

Finally, Foucault’s genealogy rejects what he refers to as a *utopian dissolution* of the Gulag question, a critique that actually evades attending to an oppressive practice by contrasting it with an ideal standard. We must refuse, he writes, “to adopt for the critique of the Gulag a law or principle of selection internal to our own discourse or dream,” which means “not attempting to evade the problem by putting inverted commas, whether damning or ironic, around Soviet socialism in order to protect the good, true socialism—with no inverted commas—which alone can provide a legitimate standpoint

¹³⁵ To offer up just a few examples: In (Gorringer 1996), Timothy Gorringer highlights how in “various ways the theology of satisfaction distorts our understanding of God” (p. 184). Satisfaction theory has expressed some of the deepest human needs,” Gorringer writes, “but it has at the same time distorted them” (p. 270). He goes on to propose “an alternative praxis” rooted in a “different construal of redemption” (p. 270). In a similar vein, in (Gilliard 2018), Dominique Gilliard reflects on how our “understanding of God’s wrath colors our response to crime” (p. 169). Building on Brian Stevenson’s work in *Just Mercy* of how “our brokenness distorts what we understand and pursue as justice,” (5) Gilliard critiques penal substitution and turns to a biblical definition of justice and righteous to offer a reading of divine justice as restorative. In (Logan 2008), James Samuel Logan draws on Stanley Hauerwas to propose a “politics of reconciled memory” and “ethics of punishment” that calls into question and challenges “distortions in the grammar of the Christian faith,” and thus “offers promise to the extent that it challenges Christians to imagine and perform ‘good punishment’ that heals and reconciles” (pp. 145, 179). (Snyder 2001) explores how the spirit of punishment in our culture is rooted in and reinforced by popular Christian misunderstandings of human nature and God’s grace, and turns to two specific “theological distortions” as the site of those misunderstandings.

¹³⁶ (Welch 1985, p. 69).

¹³⁷ (Foucault 1980, p. 136).

¹³⁸ (Tanner 1997, pp. 66, 107).

¹³⁹ (Tanner 1997, p. 78).

for a politically valid critique of the Gulag.”¹⁴⁰ This, even more than the historicizing reduction, is a temptation that much theological reflection on oppression—including, in many ways, this very essay—falls prey to, as do theological turns to practices. Theologians are understandably, and perhaps rightfully, wont to uphold and taut idealized visions and accounts of Christianity and theology, even as they (we) challenge and critique theological claims, frames, and practices (often using those idealized visions and accounts as the contrast to and/or constructive response to such critiques). Yet “Foucault challenges us,” Welch writes, “to recognize the folly of criticizing oppression in terms of the ‘real Christianity.’”¹⁴¹

“These operations,” theoretical and historicist reductions, and universalizing and utopian dissolutions, “all serve the same role,” Foucault writes: “to preserve the currency among us of a . . . discourse whose organising principles remain unchanged.”¹⁴² Genealogy, conversely, demands a willingness to risk bankruptcy, so to speak, to risk a kind of discursive abolition, recognizing that attending to subjugated knowledges and seeking and speaking truth may indeed lead to such a discursive—and, in some circumstances, material/actual—death. For theology to embody and engender a robust moral imagination, the kind that compels people to challenge and resist the evil of the prison industrial complex that has resulted in mass incarceration in the U.S. today, this paper has sought to argue, this kind of willingness—an abolitionist imagination—is needed.

What, though, might such an abolitionist imagination look like in theology? What options are left if one manages to avoid and resist these reductions and dissolutions? At the end of his discussion of the utopian dissolution, Foucault offers an alternative. He writes:

We must open our eyes on the contrary to what enables people there, on the spot, to resist the Gulag, what makes it intolerable for them, and what can give the people of the anti-Gulag the courage to stand up and die in order to be able to utter a word or a poem. We must discover what makes [doctor and Soviet dissident] Mikhail Stern say ‘I will not give in’. We must find out too how those ‘almost illiterate’ men and women gathered together (under what threats?) to accuse him found the strength to publicly exonerate him. We should listen to these people, not to our century-old little love song for ‘socialism’. What is it that sustains them, what gives them their energy, what is the force at work in their resistance, what makes them stand and fight? And above all let us not ask them if they are really, still and despite everything, ‘communists’, as if that were the condition for our consenting to listen to them. *The leverage against the Gulag is not in our heads, but in their bodies, their energy, what they say, think and do.*¹⁴³

The leverage against mass incarceration, against the prison industrial complex, is not in our intricate theological frameworks and our detailed turn to practices, but in the bodies and energies of those subject to the violence and indignities of the prison, in the reflections, and actions of insiders. To continually listen to the voices of those oppressed is to recognize the limits of our own ossified epistemologies and ethical frameworks, and destabilizes “the deep division between innocence and guilt.”¹⁴⁴ It is when theologies and practices listen to and seek to learn from and engage alongside those on the inside that it will tap into and harness its own moral imagination.

“Do you think that the teaching of philosophy—and its moral code—would remain unchanged if the penal system collapsed?,” Foucault asks, during a conversation with a group of lycée students.¹⁴⁵ It is clear from the context of the conversation (as well as from the broader context of Foucault’s

¹⁴⁰ (Foucault 1980, p. 136). “Actually the only socialism which deserves these scornful scare-quotes,” he continues, “is the one which leads the dreamy life of ideality in our heads”.

¹⁴¹ (Welch 1985, p. 71).

¹⁴² (Foucault 1980, p. 137).

¹⁴³ (Foucault 1980, p. 136), emphasis mine.

¹⁴⁴ (Foucault 1977, p. 227).

¹⁴⁵ (Foucault 1977, p. 228; McWhorter 2016, p. 24).

reflections on prisons and on subjugated knowledges) that he believes it indeed would not (which is to say, the teaching of philosophy would indeed change), as he critiques humanists and reformers who “wish to change the institution without touching the ideological system.”¹⁴⁶ Foucault’s question could—and, I argue, should—also be asked of the teaching of theology and its moral code. Theological turns to practices, this paper has argued, both explicitly and through their epistemological and ethical presuppositions, have functioned as though the penal system will not, and should not, collapse, and have thus stifled their own moral imaginations.¹⁴⁷ Yet, as the work of the GIP, and both theoretical and theological reflection on that work, has demonstrated that a different kind of turn to practices is possible, though it is one that risks, rather than seeks to secure, theology’s future. “I dream of the intellectual,” Foucault writes, “who incessantly displaces themselves, who doesn’t know for sure either where they will be or what they will think tomorrow, because they are too attentive to the present.” This kind of intellectual “contributes to the posing of the question of knowing whether the revolution is worth it, and what kind of revolution it is and what it is worth, it being understood that only those who are willing to risk their lives to bring it about can reply.”¹⁴⁸ Reflecting on this particular passage, Mark Kelly writes that this “is to say that the role of the intellectual is not to play to role of an armchair general, nor to pontificate about the future, but to analyse the present on behalf of those who might actually opt to militate at the risk of their own existence.”¹⁴⁹ Following Welch, I believe that this is the role that theologians can and should inhabit and embody, and in doing so, might better address and effect change—might strike water in a parched moral imagination—within and for (or, rather, against) the booming and thriving unjust prison system that exists in the U.S. today.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: This essay is dedicated to those I worked and worshipped with, both insiders and outsiders, at Riverbend Maximum Security Prison in Nashville, TN, in 2013–2014, most notably (but by no means solely!) Kayla Brandt, Chris Hallum, Jeannie Alexander, and Jacob Davis.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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¹⁴⁶ (Foucault 1977, p. 228).

¹⁴⁷ Coakley, for instance, notes that she does not “reject, as some do, the very existence of institutions of imprisonment for dangerous criminals” (Coakley 2004b, p. 20).

¹⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, “Le savoir comme crime” (1976), in (Foucault 2001b), No. 174, pp. 268–69.

¹⁴⁹ (Kelly 2009, p. 138), emphasis mine.

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