

## **Religious Studies Inside and Outside Prison Walls: A Workshop**

### Applicants:

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### Description:

Mass incarceration has drawn broad scholarly interest, and religious studies scholars have begun to join this conversation. They have asked how religious ideas (for example, about the meaning of justice or penitence) have contributed to the rise of mass incarceration, and how religious ideas might challenge mass incarceration. Some have investigated religious pluralism in prison chapels, the role of evangelical groups in prisons, and questions of religious freedom raised by contemporary prisons.

At the same time as scholarly interest in mass incarceration is on the rise, an increasing number of colleges and universities are offering classes inside prison walls, including religious studies classes. Higher education opportunities inside prisons were once common, but prisoners were excluded from Pell Grants in the US in 1994, leading to a decimation of the prison education landscape. In Canada, also in the mid-1990s, the case of Karla Homolka, a woman prisoner who received a degree while incarcerated but committed violent crimes when released, was exploited to enact a parallel shrinkage in prison education opportunities. Teaching university courses in prisons poses unique challenges and offers unique opportunities, both for instructors and students. It offers prisoners the skills to think critically about themselves and their environments in a space that does not encourage critical thought, and it offers them the ability, post-incarceration, to articulate their experiences with mass incarceration. Teaching religious studies inside prison walls promises insights that may be of interest to religious studies pedagogy outside prison walls and to the burgeoning field of religious studies scholarship on incarceration.

In the EIR, there are currently about ten programs offering higher education in prison. Of these, only one includes a substantial theology or religious studies component (see below). We propose to offer a workshop that brings current prison educators from these programs together with religious studies and theology scholars interested in starting prison education programs. We hope to encourage current prison education programs in our region to consider adding religious studies or theology components, and we hope to give prospective prison educators from our discipline the resources and support they need to make their visions of prison education more concrete. Furthermore, given the growing scholarly interest in these issues, we hope to explore how such scholarship can be advanced by prisoners themselves and by critical reflection on prison pedagogy. Finally, we hope to broaden and strengthen a growing network of religious studies and theology scholars interested in these issues.

Our proposal builds on a three year (2012-2014), Mellon Foundation-funded working group exploring religion and mass incarceration. This collaboration between Central New York

scholars (at Cornell, Rochester, and Syracuse) included study group meetings, a conference, a performance art project, and it will conclude with a graduate student workshop in October, 2014. Our AAR Regional Development Grant proposal expands this existing Central New York network, folding in scholars from Ontario, Quebec, and elsewhere in the EIR, and it links research and teaching around these issues.

The workshop we propose will be advertised via the existing national Religion and Incarceration Network online (listserv, Facebook, and website) as well as via e-mail invitations distributed through religious studies and theology departments in our region. The workshop will take place on Sunday, May 3, the day following the AAR-EIR annual meeting, in Montreal (venue to be determined in consultation with our McGill colleagues). It will include six established prison educators (from higher education programs not necessarily religious studies-focused) as well as six religious studies and theology scholars interested in participating in existing prison education programs or in starting their own programs. The workshop will include presentations by current prison educators, discussion of the prospects and challenges for religious studies and theology scholars starting prison education programs, discussion of ways to connect research and teaching, one-on-one discussions with current and prospective prison educators, and plenty of opportunity for informal networking over lunch, coffee, and dinner.

Dissemination:

- We intend to propose a special issue of the Wabash Center's journal, *Teaching Theology and Religion*, on teaching religion inside prisons that would include contributions from a subset of workshop participants.
- We intend to use the Religion and Incarceration Network's website (<http://religionandincarceration.com/>) to share conference information about the workshop and its outcomes as well as to share a description of best practices in current prison education programs drafted during the workshop so this information is available for those in other regions who may be interested in replicating this workshop.
- We will encourage participants to share their individualized working plans via e-mail with other participants, and we will send a "check-in" note 3, 6, and 12 months after the workshop.
- Time will be allocated in the workshop schedule for a group discussion of dissemination strategies to spread this type of workshop to other AAR regions.

Current Prison Education Programs in the EIR:

Cornell Prison Education Project (Auburn, NY)

Bard Prison Initiative (6 NY sites)

Niagara University, Canisius College, and Daemen College (Attica)

New York Theological Seminary (multiple sites including several in EIR)

Vassar (Bedford Hills and Greenhaven)

Medaille College (Albion)

*Inside-Out Programs:*

Wilfrid Laurier

Ryerson

University of Toronto Mississauga

York

McGill (in development)

Tentative Schedule:

Sunday, May 3, 2015, Montreal, QC

9:30am	Introductions
10am	Presentations of Current Prison Educators: Program Histories, Challenges, and Achievements → <i>Outcome: Draft document describing best practices</i>
12pm	Group Lunch
1:30pm	Teaching Religious Studies in Prison: Prospective Prison Educators Share Goals, Concerns, and Resource Assessment
2:30pm	One on One Mentoring: Current Prison Educators Paired with Prospective Prison Educators → <i>Outcome: Draft individualized working plan with scheduled goals</i>
3:15pm	Coffee Break
3:30pm	Share Working Plans
4pm	Connecting Research and Teaching: Discussion of the State of the Field
5:30pm	Next Steps for the Group → <i>Outcome: Plan for replicating workshop in other regions and/or at national AAR annual meeting</i>
6pm	Group Dinner

Budget:

*Expenses*

Travel (6 non-EIR members)	\$
Lodgings (12 non-EIR members x 2 nights)	\$
Meals (12 workshop participants)	\$
TOTAL	\$

*Requests:*

AAR Regional Development Grant	\$
Wabash Center Small Project Grant	\$
TOTAL	\$