Prison Madness

The Quakers of Pennsylvania invented the penitentiary as a place to lock up lawbreakers so they would reflect on their offense and become penitent. Today, many of our prisons have become storehouses of degradation where criminality festers and grows, breeding more anger than penitence.

What kind of country is this that prides itself on freedom, democracy, and a Christian moral tradition, yet locks away more than five times as many people as other countries in the world? “Either we have the most evil people on Earth living in the United States,” says Sen. Jim Webb (D-VA), “or we are doing something dramatically wrong in terms of how we approach the issue of criminal justice” (Manuel Roig-Franzia, Washington Post, 6 July 2009).

Sen. Webb has taken the lead in Congress to call the whole mess into question and to propose “a sweeping examination of the American criminal justice system.” He has introduced a bill with a list of detailed duties to be carried out by a commission that will be established if the bill becomes law. But why has it taken a new senator, with a peculiar passion for justice on this matter, to initiate such an effort when the crisis has long been evident?

What kind of people are we who scream when the financial system degrades our savings or the government proposes to raise our taxes, but who feel no twinge of conscience about the fact that more than 50,000 prisoners were sexually abused—many raped—in prison last year? We have urged lawmakers to lock up drug users as well as drug dealers, thieves as well as murderers, and don’t want to know what happens to them. We don’t want to know that one of the undeserved penalties many of them will suffer while incarcerated is a violent attack by other inmates. Yet more than once the US Supreme Court has said that “sexual abuse is ‘not part of the penalty that criminal offenders pay for their offenses against society’” (Washington Post editorial, 23 June 2009). It is, as the Post’s editors contend, “cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Our overcrowded, ill-managed prison systems are places of violence, physical abuse, and hate, making them breeding grounds that perpetuate and magnify the same types of behavior we purport to fear,” says Webb. Consequently, it is not simply an unjust system of imprisonment that we are supporting. We are acquiescing, whether
consciously or not, in the further break down of our society. Not only is one of every 31 Americans—7.3 million people in all—now behind bars, on probation, or on parole, but many of those who return to society carry with them the traumatic effects of their experience in prison. A high percentage of them will be arrested and sent back within three years.

Christians know that we have been admonished to visit the prisoners as well as the sick, but going to a hospital to visit a loved one is a lot easier than dropping by a prison to visit a stranger or even a loved one. A prison visit for many of us would be devastating. Going beyond that to join others in working for criminal justice reform is hardly even contemplated and not something that most of us feel any obligation to do.

All the more should we be thankful that Sen. Webb is pushing for a comprehensive reexamination and reform of the system. We should support him! And all the more should we be thankful for those unsung ministers of mercy who are trying to understand the causes and consequences of incarceration in American prisons as well as seeking reforms. Sunny Schwartz, who calls today’s prisons “monster factories” (her book is Dreams from the Monster Factory: A Tale of Prison, Redemption and One Woman’s Fight to Restore Justice to All) is one such person. For nearly 30 years Schwartz has been meeting with and listening to prisoners, working to help them face what few of them are able to do on their own: recognize and admit the harm they have done to others. She has probed to the root of criminal behavior and its relation to degraded families and neighborhoods, drug dealing, lack of education, racism, and shame that leads to violent actions. (See Helen Epstein’s review of Schwartz’s book, “America’s prisons: Is There Hope?” in The New York Review of Books, 11 June 2009.)

Then there is the extensive work of Daniel Van Ness and his colleagues on the theory, principles, and practice of “restorative justice,” done all the way back in the 1980s at Justice Fellowship (www.justicefellowship.org). His work, like Schwartz’s, was wide in scope, taking into account victims as well as offenders, communities as well as the prison system, churches as well as government, and showing that half of those in prison should not be there but should have been required to make restitution for their crimes.

What is the religion that grounds our understanding of human identity and purpose, of government and its duties, of crime and punishment, and of the responsibilities of families, schools, businesses, churches, and social-service organizations? Christians should be pleading for God’s forgiveness for our complicity in a criminal justice system that perpetrates and perpetuates so much injustice. And genuine repentance means turning around to do what is right.

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