



**A Bend in the Punitive Road:**  
The Unexpected Profundity of Burl Cain's Religious and Moral  
Rehabilitation in Angola Prison, 1995-2015

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## **Home to God**

Let me walk, my blessed Saviour

In the way that thou hast trod  
Keep my eyes upon the goal

Lord till I make it home to God

Let me never walk in darkness  
Keep my mind upon the right

Never let old Satan snare me

Lost in that eternal night  
Keep me moving upward

Life my eyes straight up to thee

- Donald Hanson #499906

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## INTRODUCTION

Burl Cain stands around six feet tall. With a mop of silver hair, broad shoulders, and beady eyes, Burl is, essentially, burly; he embodies his namesake. Serving as the prison warden of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known as Angola, from 1995 to 2016, Cain's time as warden has been characterized by controversy and challenge. In his twenty year wardenship Cain has been regarded as both a prison reform hero and an exploitative crook.<sup>1</sup> While the American prison system has exploded in the past twenty years to levels unprecedented in American history, Louisiana has the highest imprisonment rate of all. In 2012 alone, 893 of 100,000 Louisiana citizens were incarcerated.<sup>2</sup> Angola houses over 6,300 men of which more than 80% are African-American, while covering as much land as the island of Manhattan—it is the largest maximum security prison in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In 1954, *Colliers* magazine dubbed Angola, “America’s worst prison.”<sup>4</sup> Angola’s history is vast and brutal, straight back to its inception as a slave plantation in the 1800’s. Today, Angola is one-of-a-kind partly because of its sheer size, both population-wise and in the physical area it covers, and partly because it is so much more than just a prison. Out of Angola comes a radio show, “Down Home LA” and a newspaper, “The Angolite.” Because of the vast geography of the prison, covering, 18,000 acres of land, much of the staff and their families live on the property. Angola is a bustling community, for better or for

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Eckholm, “Bible College Helps Some at Louisiana Prison Find Peace,” *New York Times*, (New York, NY), October 5, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hallett, Joshua Hays, Byron R. Johnson, Sung Joon Jang, Grant Duwe, *The Angola Prison Seminary: Effects of Faith-Based Ministry on Identity Transformation, Desistance, and Rehabilitation*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “The End of the Line: Rehabilitation and Reform in Angola Penitentiary,” *The Atlantic*, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Chuck Hustmyre, “A Notorious Prison’s Conversion,” *The Washington Post*, (Washington DC), July 24, 2004.

worse. All of these facets of Angola contribute to its unique and dramatic history, and Burl Cain's unconventionality as warden proves to be no exception.

As a staunch Christian and believer in the power of redemption, Burl Cain worked to make religion central at Angola throughout his 20-year wardenship. Focusing on what he called "moral rehabilitation," Cain championed the idea that inmates could be rehabilitated best not through education or psychotherapy, but religious thought and practice. For Cain, religion was the greatest tool for changing one's soul. As with most debates around the separation of church and state, Cain's promotion of Christianity within the confines of a state run facility was a complex and multifaceted endeavor, one that naturally faced both criticism and support. Under Cain's leadership, however, certain benefits were impossible to ignore, such as the stark drop in violent incidents in facility previously dominated by violence. In 1992, before Cain became warden there were over 1,300 assaults in the prison yearly, by 2014 there were less than 350 documented in a year.<sup>5</sup> But things weren't all perfect under Burl. Various lawsuits were filed against the warden, and attorney Ben Cohen quite negatively characterizes Cain writing, "The prison is run on fear, not the prospects of redemption. Inmates, guards, even lawyers are afraid of Cain."<sup>6</sup> So what was really going on at Angola between 1995-2015? Can religion work within a prison, and how? The controversial topic of religiosity within federal or state facilities is not a new one. In fact, national statistics show that fewer than 1% of prison inmates are atheist.<sup>7</sup>

This thesis, however, is not a dissection of legal statutes or the intricacies of Christianity. The following chapters look into why the imposition of religion by Burl Cain in Angola drew

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<sup>5</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Cohen, "At Louisiana's Most Notorious Prison, a Clash of Testament," *The Atlantic*, 11 October 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Jolie Spiegelman, "The Hidden Culture of Religion Behind Bars," *The Medium*, June 18, 2015, <https://medium.com/purple-politics/the-hidden-culture-of-religion-behind-bars-6eae87f7c43b>.

such attention and what this attention meant. Chapter One chronicles the history of the prison in America and the shifts in the American approach to imprisonment from the 17<sup>th</sup> century through the 20<sup>th</sup>. I argue this history is emblematic of a pendulum swinging back and forth from retributive, unforgiving and violent punishment, to rehabilitative punishment, and back again. This ping-pong-like back and forth from one type of imprisonment to its opposite throughout America's history is somewhat applicable to Angola prison. Angola and its history represent a more extreme and less progressive version of America's approach to imprisonment, characterized almost entirely by retributive policies until Burl Cain in 1995. While America's approach to imprisonment progressed in a three steps forward, two steps back fashion, Angola's history is disturbingly monotonous, even arguably worsening as time went on.

In Chapter Two I will unravel the ways in which religion, especially through the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary Bible College, gave opportunities both tangible and emotional, to inmates that were previously either inaccessible or taken away by the time Burl Cain arrived. I will argue religion at Angola worked in four positive and groundbreaking ways. The first of these was in beginning the process of breaking down and challenging the previous racial, religious, and ethnic segregation of life at Angola by allowing for more diversity and integration of inmates of various backgrounds through education and religious programming. By offering four-year college degrees from an accredited institution, Burl Cain educated inmates resulting in inmates being able to hold leadership positions themselves. Secondly, I argue religion worked as a tool to shift one's morality. In what he calls "moral rehabilitation," we see, through personal poetry from *The Angolite* and inmate interviews, shift in ethical standards and views of themselves in the world. Thirdly, I argue religion challenged the previously rigid authoritative structures of the prison. New physical spaces altered power dynamics between

inmates and guards, inherently place more trust in inmates and allowing for previously unseen overlap between the two groups. Inmates worked towards taking on rehabilitative mentorship roles for young, new inmates. Finally, religion at Angola re-valued the human life through new memorial services and hospice programs that care sensitively for those who are dying or have died while imprisoned at Angola. While American cultural and political structures in the 1990s's were in every way working against the prisoner, while society was in the midst of a strong fight against crime, Burl Cain came forward with a religious ideology and humanized inmates, giving them a second chance at life through religion.

### **Historiography**

Because Burl Cain and religious rehabilitation within Angola is a relatively recent phenomenon, scholarly research and conclusive findings on the new religious educational system are somewhat limited. Although much has been written about religion in the context of crime, there are not numerous studies of Angola its religious programming specifically. One major text, however, has guided my research incomparably. *The Angola Prison Seminary: Effects of Faith-Based Ministry on Identity, Transformation, Desistance, and Rehabilitation* documents the effects of the inmate minister program on inmates at Angola in a three-year study. Done by scholars Michael Hallett, Joshua Hays, Byron R. Johnson, Sung Joon Jang, Grant Duwe the study finds strong effects on inmates who go through the program in inmates' self-reported identity change and "religiously motivated desistance." The study offers first hand evidence on the positive effects of religion and the ministry program on inmates at Angola.

*Cain's Redemption: A Story of Hope and Transformation in America's Bloodiest Prison*, written by Dennis Shee, uses a journalistic and legal lens to shed light onto the ways in which



Burl Cain has redeemed and allowed major life changes for inmates because of his religious programming. Shere writes sympathetically towards Cain, concluding that the religious programming really does work, and by recounting inmate stories of those who have learned to take responsibility for their actions due to practicing religion in Angola we see dramatic and meaningful changes.

On a slightly similar but more critical note, another journalistic writer Daniel Bergner in *God of the Rodeo: The Quest for Redemption in Louisiana's Angola Prison*, goes into Angola only to come out completely baffled by what he had witnessed there. His account centers around the Angola Prison Rodeo, an annual event where inmates both participate in and run a large-scale rodeo. Bergner, however, is disturbed and disappointed by the way Burl Cain conducts business with the rodeo, arguing Burl Cain is not the perfect healer many make him out to be, even going so far as to call Angola “a setting... offer[ing] them few resources and a punitive environment in which to live.” Bergner’s account of Angola under Burl Cain certainly paints a more negative picture than Shere or Hallett et. al. Scholar Tanya Erzen similarly takes a critical view towards religion in prison in *God In Captivity: Redemption and Punishment in America's Faith-Based Prisons*. Erzen argues that although religion in prison and faith-based programming can help inmates with dignity and self-transformation, these religious programs often become another method of enhancing and enforcing the punitive regime of American imprisonment.

A final relevant source on the topic of religion within prisons is written by scholar Winnifred Fallers Sullivan. Sullivan discusses neither Burl Cain nor Angola in depth, but covers faith-based reforms in prisons in relation to an Iowa court case. Her book, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* uses a court case about a faith-based rehabilitation program in an Iowa prison in to document what she calls the new “new religio-legal scene.” Sullivan believes

the separation of church and state is no longer possible—that religious authority has shifted from institutions to individuals, making it difficult to define religion, let alone disentangle it from the state. Too many programs are religiously funded or backed and therefore religion has begun to permeate all aspects of society. The question, for Sullivan, is about why this happens, and why so many think it is inherently bad to mix church and state especially when the end goal is largely positive.

The following thesis uses primary evidence such as poetry and news articles coming from within the prison walls in *The Angolite*, scientific studies, inmate and guard video interviews, a documentary film, photography, and numerous secondary sources, to argue in a similar vein to Michael Hallett et. al., Dennis Shere, and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan-- that religion is a vital tool and now inextricably tied to the prison itself, but also creates vital and lasting change which would be inaccessible through other means. By using numerous types of sources from scientific data to images to audio interviews and news articles, I aim to delve into specific day-to-day aspects of life at Angola, showing how Burl Cain's time as warden broke through a strongly built foundation of retribution to come out on the other side preaching, and succeeding, in humanizing Angola's inhabitants.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A History of the American Prison

In recent years, mass-incarceration in the United States has become a phenomenon, a spectacle unseen elsewhere in the world. This practice has gained widespread criticism, both at home and abroad. Authors such as Michelle Alexander trace the rise in incarceration back to the years of slavery, arguing that since slave times African-American men have been targeted and exploited in various ways, mass incarceration represents just another example of this. Although the sheer scale and growth of those incarcerated in the last 20 years is unprecedented—the rate of incarceration for drug offenses has gone up 1,100% since the 1980s—prisons have always been a fundamental part of the United States since its inception.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars, such as Anthony Vaver, tell a story going back to before the slave trade even begins, that the United States was built by and for the convicts who arrived here from England. This chapter synthesizes the history of the American prison. Although the rise in incarceration in the past thirty years is striking, the history of the American prison is no less harsh. This chapter traces the American prison back to its origins in Elizabethan England, follows it through convict transportation, notes a brief progressive era of rehabilitation in Quaker Pennsylvania in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and progresses to the retributive and unforgiving mandatory drug minimum sentencing laws of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This history shows many things, but here it is an attempt to focus on and provide examples of the intensely punitive nature the American prison has maintained throughout its history. Although at times see-sawing back and forth between progressiveness and retribution, the approach to imprisoning people in America has been guided almost entirely by punishing, by removing the individual from society as opposed to rehabilitating the individual for their reentry.

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<sup>8</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: The New Press), 60.

Understanding the early phases of America's approach to imprisonment makes the current abysmal situation within United States prisons less shocking: it is simply a continuation of the punitive policies which have forever characterized the American prison system. In the next chapter we will see how Angola Prison and its violent history are an exaggerated microcosm of the greater American prison system. Understanding the intricate and lengthy history of the American prison will, in the next chapter, be a vital background in comparing Angola's historical approach to imprisonment to the American approach to imprisonment and further will make clear just how radical Burl Cain's religious rehabilitation in Angola really was.

The United States was a nation built by and for prisoners. In fact, the prison and the prisoner were arguably in the United States before the United States even became its own separate entity from England. To understand the first punitive prisons in early America, we must look overseas to England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In Tudor England during the 1500's, most of the population made a living through farming.<sup>9</sup> As the population expanded, so did English commercialization and a transformation in industry and economy. The Enclosure Movement, taking place in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was a new economic movement which replaced old farming methods with newly divided up private plots of land which, "offered a means of rapid transformation to lower costs per acre, higher yields, and [allow for] greater profits on a larger cultivated area."<sup>10</sup> The Enclosure Movement inherently oppressed the lower classes because of the newfound land competition—poor landless

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<sup>9</sup> Tim Lambert, "Life in 16<sup>th</sup> Century England," *Local Histories*, 2017, <http://www.localhistories.org/tudor.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Andre Zmolek, *Rethinking the Industrial Revolution: Five Centuries of Transition from Agrarian to Industrial Capitalism in England*, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2013), 274.

peasants were now forced to seek employment elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> There was a sizeable immigration from rural to urban areas, such as London. One scholar, Spencer Dimmock, calls this a “forced depopulation.”<sup>12</sup> The relocation of poor English citizens into London and other urban centers led to massive social problems. Authorities tried to create a system of disciplinary laws, known as the “Elizabethan Poor Laws.” This early type of welfare system, “buffered English society from the dislocating effects of an emerging capitalist economy with built-in structural unemployment.”<sup>13</sup> The draconian laws passed in Elizabethan England at this time instituted gruesome punishments for crimes, such as whipping, public humiliation, hanging, and burning at the stake.<sup>14</sup>

In the midst of the Enclosure Movement, “workhouses” were established in England as a way of giving homeless peasants somewhere to stay in exchange for their labor. Although later morphing into the first traces of imprisonment, the original objective of a workhouse was to establish a means of relief for poor citizens—allowing them to work while giving them a place to live.<sup>15</sup> Soon workhouses began to house local offenders: they would serve their time at a workhouse and the owner would pay the jailer for the criminal’s labor to offset their criminal penalties.<sup>16</sup> Conflating poor citizens with criminals shows the beginning of a pattern which only gains traction as time goes on, that class and criminality are tightly linked. This practice sheds

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<sup>11</sup> Harriet Bradley, *The Enclosures in England: An Economic Reconstruction*, (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books Limited, 1918), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Spencer Dimmock, *The Origin of Capitalism in England, 1400-1600*, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2014), 143.

<sup>13</sup> Zmolek, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Liza Picard, “Crime and Punishment in Elizabethan England,” *British Library*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/crime-and-punishment-in-elizabethan-england>.

<sup>15</sup> Eugene Byron Price and John Charles Morris, *Prison Privatization: The Many Facets of a Controversial Industry* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2012), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Price and Morris, 12.

light on the way imprisonment and social/economic status have always gone hand in hand, even since 16<sup>th</sup> century England.

The most famous prison of 16<sup>th</sup> century England was the notorious Newgate prison, often called “the hanging prison.” Newgate housed the most violent and disturbed of all criminals, “[Newgate] was a closed-off world of racketeering and inequality, cruelty and deprivation.”<sup>17</sup> Newgate held those awaiting trial and those awaiting death or transportation. Punishment at this time in England was violent and unrelenting: capital punishment was a common punishment for crimes even as trivial as theft.<sup>18</sup> While the workhouse shows the relationship between class and imprisonment, Newgate is emblematic of the harsh punitive approach to punishment which dominated Europe at this time and later America. The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in England saw a period known as the “Bloody Codes,” a reference to the high number of crimes which could result in the death penalty. Punishment in these years was primarily bodily: torture, hangings, and executions were common punishments for criminals. The combination of the growth in population, the atrocious conditions and overcrowding at the few prisons available, and England’s desire to spread their influence, a new type of punishment emerged in conjunction with England’s desire to spread their empire, that of convict transportation to America, a practice dominating the following century in England.

As the population of England, especially London, grew rapidly, the government began to contemplate other options aside from capital punishment for their growing inmate population. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century transportation emerged as an alternative to the death penalty in England. Convict transportation sent those accused of less serious crimes to America to serve as

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<sup>17</sup> Caroline Jowett, *The History of Newgate Prison*, (South Yorkshire, England: 2017), 11.

<sup>18</sup> David Taylor, *Crime, Policing, and Punishment in England 1750-1914*, (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 129.

indentured servants as their punishment instead of imprisoning or killing them. Although still a form of corporeal punishment, indentured servitude used the body to perform labor instead of to humiliate or deprive the body of life. With the expansion of England's global trade, its interest in promoting their American colonies, and a strong need for more labor to maintain the production of resources and building, convicts were sent overseas to perform these tasks. As Virginia and other Maryland's tobacco trade flourished, so did the transportation of convicts from England to the colonies to assist with the labor, "thus it was that a royal commission concluded that any felon, except those convicted of murder, witchcraft burglary, or rape, could legally be transported to Virginia or the West Indies to become servants on the plantations."<sup>19</sup> Indentured servitude usually lasted between 7-14 years and consisted of intense physical labor to help build and maintain the new British colonies. Although at the end of their years as a laborer one was allowed to return to England, often death and disease inhibited one's chances of returning home.<sup>20</sup>

Convict transportation was a controversial endeavor. Although transporting criminals was great for British society—giving them the ability to rid themselves of their "bad" citizens without crowding their prisons while also seemingly helping their new colony—those who lived in the colonies at the time were often opposed to the new system. Convict transportation peaked between 1700-1775 with over 52,000 convicts arriving to English colonies. This number was about 9% of the total number of immigrants entering the Thirteen Colonies during those years.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Scott Christianson, *With Liberty for Some: 500 Years of Imprisonment in America*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern, 1998), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Abigail Leslie Swingen, *Competing Versions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Vaver, *Bound with an Iron Chain: The Untold Story of how the British Transported 50,000 Convicts to Colonial America*, (Westborough, MA: Pickpocket Publishing, 2011), 7.

Scholar Anthony Vaver details some of the complexity and controversy surrounding the way America was being built on the backs of these convicts,

When the British began expelling criminals from their country and sending them overseas, they not only cut ties with their unruly citizens and abdicated responsibility for punishing their behavior, but they also displaced the criminality that was a product of their own society on to the American colonies. America became recast as a destination for British convicts, and its reputation became tarnished as a result. In addition, convict transportation reinforced the subordinate position of the American colonies to Great Britain. If England was willing to dump its criminals on America, then what did that say about how it perceived the relationship between the two countries? Convict transportation may not have been a direct cause of the American Revolution, but it certainly helped create the conditions that gave rise to it.<sup>22</sup>

The American Revolution in the late 1700's brought about a delicate period in the history of convict transportation. In 1775 William Eden, the home office secretary of England, was left in charge of finding new accommodations for over 1,000 convicts a year who normally would have been shipped off to America.<sup>23</sup> Because the British assumed the American Revolution would be a quick and easy victory, instead of building prisons to house these people, England instead used "prison hulks." These "hulks" were "English water ships that had been originally used to transport convicts. These ships would serve as temporary places of confinement in England's ports for their prisoners until they could be transferred once again to America."<sup>24</sup>

The American Revolution, however, lasted many years and did not result in a British victory, which meant that these hulks ended up being anything but temporary. The convicts were no longer able to be transported to America after the Revolution and America's triumph marked a new era in the development of the United States prison system. Disturbingly enough, this seemingly antiquated method of imprisoning inmates on a ship can be seen in use today, less

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<sup>22</sup> Vaver, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Vaver, 235.

<sup>24</sup> Vaver, 235.



than ten miles from Columbia University's main campus— The Vernon C. Bain center, more commonly called “the Boat,” is a medium security prison in the South Bronx of New York, housing its over 800 inmates on a floating jail in the East River.<sup>25</sup> The inability of convict labor to satisfy the demand for workers in the colonies led to a search for alternatives of labor which soon came to flourish in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.<sup>26</sup>

Slavery was, like workhouses, another form of imprisoning one based on ones inherited trait, instead of class slavery imprisoned and exploited people based on their heritage or ethnicity. African men women and children, over twelve million of them, were enslaved for four centuries, being purchased and sold as “chattel property used for their labor and skills” throughout the Americas.<sup>27</sup> The Slave trade was especially prevalent in the American south which we will later see in the history of Angola. Angola's location on a former slave plantation plays a role in the way facets of slave culture continue to be used in America's approach to punishment today. Some say Angola is actually named after the country in Africa for which many of its slaves originated. While slavery represents one form of imprisonment based on ethnicity, imprisonment based on crime did persist throughout the early years of America's founding.

Statutes imposed in 1624 by colonists in Jamestown, Virginia document the extreme measures imposed on those who violated the law, “by starveinge, hangeinge, burneinge, breakinge upon the wheele and shootinge to death...”<sup>28</sup> Punishments were brutal and citizens

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<sup>25</sup> “Vernon C. Bain Center,” <http://www.prisonpro.com/content/vernon-c-bain-center>.

<sup>26</sup> Swingen, 15.

<sup>27</sup> “African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations: The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative*, [http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/africanpassageslowcountryadapt/introductionatlanticworld/trans\\_atlantic\\_slave\\_trade](http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/africanpassageslowcountryadapt/introductionatlanticworld/trans_atlantic_slave_trade).

<sup>28</sup> James A. Cox, “Bilboes, Brands, and Branks: Colonial Crimes and Punishments,” *History.org*. 2003, <http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/spring03/branks.cfm>.

began to react to this in America's early years. In one of the most revolutionary moments in America's approach to imprisonment, Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the signatories to the Declaration of Independence, became convinced crime was a "moral disease" and those who committed it could undergo rehabilitation to become cured.<sup>29</sup> Thus began the birth of a new type of prison system. Historian Orlando Lewis notes, "It was actually in the first year of American independence, 1776, that an early act of the newly-formed State of Pennsylvania provided, in its constitution, that the Legislature proceed, as soon as might be, to the reform of the penal laws, and invent punishments less sanguinary, and better proportioned to the various degrees of criminality."<sup>30</sup>

Under the direction of William Penn, Pennsylvania led the way in early stages of prison reform. William Penn and the Quakers were first to eradicate some of the most harsh forms of punishment, replacing them with prison labor in The Great Law of 1682 which, based on Quaker and Christian principles, "sought to establish labor as a punishment for most crimes with the exception of murder."<sup>31</sup> This law hoped to abandon what Penn saw as the antiquated practices such as the stocks, the pillory, the branding iron, and the gallows: forms of excruciating torture which he believed had no place in the new American society.<sup>32</sup> Penn had been briefly imprisoned in the Newgate prison in England and had there "endured six months of promiscuous horrors" there. Penn's philosophy was guided by an altruistic belief that criminals could reform and change without having to go through bodily torture and harm. While in England prisoners were

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<sup>29</sup> Chai Woodham, "Eastern State Penitentiary: A Prison With a Past," *Smithsonian.com*, September, 30, 2008. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/eastern-state-penitentiary-a-prison-with-a-past-14274660/>.

<sup>30</sup> Orlando Faulkland Lewis, *The Development of American Prisons and Prison Customs, 1776-1845*, (New York, NY: Prison Association of New York, 1922), 8.

<sup>31</sup> Price, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, 12.

being put to death for 200 different types of crimes, Penn reserved it for just murder and treason.<sup>33</sup> In a similar fashion to Burl Cain two centuries later in Angola, Penn approached imprisonment in a productive way, putting inmates to work learning yarn spinning and wood carving so as to be able to earn a living once their sentence was up.<sup>34</sup>

The Quakers, a prominent religious group in Pennsylvania in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, played a particularly important role in early prison reform efforts. In 1776 the Legislature of Pennsylvania established the Walnut Street Prison, a prison built upon ideals of reform and rehabilitation.<sup>35</sup> Quakers hoped that by creating a prison where the bible was a central focus, these convicts would reform through learning right from wrong and good from evil, and therefore learn to feel regret and be able to repent for their sins.<sup>36</sup> One of the ways the Quakers hoped to reform those who had committed the worst type of crime was through quiet contemplation, to be done in solitude. For those normally sentenced to die, the Walnut Street Prison instead placed them into individual small cells to be alone with themselves and to contemplate their crime and their relationship with God. The Quakers believed they were leading prison reform by imposing solitude on inmates, “the original Quaker ideal of the penitentiary had demanded utter isolation, silence, and idleness as the triple pillars of convict reformation.”<sup>37</sup> Although we now know solitary confinement produces irrevocable side effects and many argue it even constitutes torture, at the time this was seen as a lesser and more liberal punishment than what had come before.

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<sup>33</sup> “1691 Quaker Prison Reform,” *Philanthropy Roundtable*, [http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/religion/1681\\_quaker\\_prison\\_reform](http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/religion/1681_quaker_prison_reform).

<sup>34</sup> “1691 Quaker Prison Reform.”

<sup>35</sup> Price, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Gustave De Beaumont and Alexis De Tocqueville, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and its Application in France*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1833), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South 1866-1928*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 15.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century reform efforts evolved into a new type of prison called the reformatory. The first of these was the Eastern State Penitentiary, founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was based on the Walnut Street Prison in terms of its rehabilitative aims. The Eastern State Penitentiary championed reform and was built to house inmates in solitary cells. These reformatories spread from Pennsylvania to New York and their tactics can be seen in the founding of the Elmira Reformatory in the 1870's in New York. Reformatories were meant to reform inmates through the use of military drills, hard labor, exercise and even education.<sup>38</sup> Elmira, in New York, was seen, at the time, as a success. The reformatory employed an "intelligent and experienced clerk for nearly a year" to attempt to measure the results and success of the practices used at the reformatory. This was measured largely by the recidivism rate. The results of the Elmira reformatory study showed that for the 5,000 inmates who had been paroled in the year, only 365 had been sent back, a ratio of less than one in every 12 inmates.<sup>39</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century reformatory movement proved successful by almost all accounts and influenced a growth in the building of these types of institutions.

It is worth noting that although the beginning of rehabilitation as a concept can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, some of these early efforts damaged more than rehabilitated offenders. Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont, two French scholars, decided to travel to America in the 1830's to attempt to understand how France could be politically successful in the new evolving modern world. Although initially coming to America to observe democratic rule, the two were struck by the American prison system. They published "On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application in France," a work that

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<sup>38</sup> Gary Jensen, "Reformatory," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/reformatory>.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Fallows, "Do Reformatories Reform?" Illinois: Illinois State Reformatory Print, 1907.

documented the prisons they observed and the horrors within them. Although the two men believed the United States had liberty beyond what they had seen anywhere else, they also wrote that, “the prisons of the same country offer the spectacle of the most complete despotism.”<sup>40</sup> De Tocqueville disapproved of solitary confinement writing, “this absolute solitude, if nothing interrupt it, is beyond the strength of man; it destroys the criminal without intermission and without pity; it does not reform, it kills.”<sup>41</sup> Tocqueville and Beaumont also described the extreme social loss that came with imprisonment in America as compared to Europe, “in Europe the criminal is an unhappy being who is struggling for his life against the ministers of justice, whilst the population is merely a spectator of the conflict; in America he is looked upon as an enemy of the human race, and the whole of mankind is against him.”<sup>42</sup> Prisons in the United States, the two concluded, were “defective” and uncoordinated, with very little uniformity from state to state and universally appalling conditions.<sup>43</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as slavery became legally outlawed, former slave-owners and proponents of slave plantations found ways to use the prison as a tool to continue methods of forced labor. Despite the Civil War’s end in 1865, legislators and government officials in states in the American South began enforcing a new practice: convict leasing. After the end of the Civil War the prison population in America spiked, especially in the South and West, with numbers surpassing 30,000.<sup>44</sup> The mid 1800’s marked an important period in the prison’s history as

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<sup>40</sup> “Prisons: History—The Auburn Plan.” *Law Library: American Law and Legal Information*. <http://law.jrank.org/pages/1776/Prisons-History-Auburn-plan.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Beaumont & Tocqueville, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Translated by Henry Reeve, (New York, NY: The Century Company, 1898), 94.

<sup>43</sup> Beaumont & Tocqueville, 14.

<sup>44</sup> “Historical Insights: Prison Life—1865 to 1900,” *Ancestry.com*, <https://www.ancestry.com/contextux/historicalinsights/prison-life-united-states-after-civil-war>, 1.

inmates and their forced labor began to turn over real profits and by the turn of the century, reform had fallen out of focus in the American South. With the introduction of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States,” made it lawful for people to be enslaved if they were convicted of a crime, which was easy now because of the new Jim Crow laws.<sup>45</sup> Authors such as Michelle Alexander and filmmaker Ava DuVernay describe the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment as the way the South was able to continue slavery despite having “lost” the Civil War.

With the introduction of Jim Crow Laws, African-Americans were suddenly targeted in a different way and their behavior, even something as simply as standing on the wrong side of the street, became criminalized. With this surge in arrests came the invention of chain gangs and convict leasing, “filling the labor shortage caused by the end of slavery; prisoners worked 15-hour days without pay.”<sup>46</sup> In a case from 1871, *Ruffin v. Commonwealth*, convict leasing was described, “as a consequence of their offense, inmates not only waived their liberty but also their personal rights... Thus, a prisoner was the slave of the state until released from its jurisdiction.”<sup>47</sup> The Virginia Supreme Court’s ruling that inmates were “slaves of the states” gave officials and former slave-owners incentive to find African-Americans guilty of crimes so as to then subject them to essentially the same slave labor they had been under before the Civil War. Scholar Matthew Mancini argues convict leasing was, in some ways, harsher than slavery. Mancini

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<sup>45</sup> *U.S. Constitution*. Amend. 13.

<sup>46</sup> “Historical Insights: Prison Life—1865 to 1900.”

<sup>47</sup> Price, 15.

quotes a former slave lessee, “before the war, we owned the negroes. If a man had a good negro he could afford to keep him...But these convicts, we don’t own ‘em. One dies, get another.”<sup>48</sup>

The turn of the century brought with it a wide array of prison reform efforts. In 1870 the National Prison Association was formed, an organization which observed and changed prison practices based on new information and advances. In 1907 the NPA published a vast report addressing difficult questions, notably the debate over retributive punishment vs. rehabilitation. The report opens with a powerful series of statements emblematic of the debate over what was to be done with convicts at the time, “Crime must be repressed; we are all of one mind to that. In order to [address] the repression of crime, the criminal must be eliminated. But how? By his destruction? Or by his redemption? Is he to be killed or cured?”<sup>49</sup> The report goes on to condemn any type of private or for-profit prisons, to express the importance of a juvenile court system and the value of treating children with less severity than adults in the legal system.

One of the writers of the report in 1907 was a man named Samuel June Barrows. Barrows, in his own research with his wife Isabel, brought forth criticisms of prison practices still around today, such as the critique of private prisons, “there are still twenty-one counties in New York in which sheriffs get their living out of prisoners at so much a head...That the laws are used in any county to keep prisoners in idleness for the profit of a public official, when under a probation system they might be supporting themselves and their families, with better hope of reformation, is a grave public scandal.”<sup>50</sup> Barrows, like De Tocqueville and Beaumont, traveled extensively throughout Europe observing and documenting prisons and conditions abroad in

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<sup>48</sup> Mancini, 3.

<sup>49</sup> National Prison Association. *Proceedings of the Annual Congress of the National Prison Association of the United States 1907*, (Chicago, Illinois: Knight & Leonard. 1907), 9.

<sup>50</sup> Isabel Chapin Barrows, *A Sunny Life: The Biography of Samuel June Barrows*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown, and Company, 1913), 188.

order to help better prisons back home, discussing the ways prisons in Europe were embodying a new progressive ideal, while those in the United States were falling behind.<sup>51</sup>

The 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, bringing with it a slow but steady continuation of a punitive approach to imprisonment. Scholar Ethan Blue calls the Great Depression an early microcosm of the later War on Crime in the 1980's and 1990's saying serving a sentence in the 1930's was "eerily similar" to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>52</sup> In reviewing Blue's book, criminal justice scholar Anne-Marie Cusac writes, "in 1936...inmates raised nearly seventeen thousand acres of cotton and produced several hundred thousand cans of vegetables. In both Texas and California, the money went directly to the prison system."<sup>53</sup> Cusac continues,

Black prisoners frequently worked these grueling jobs. Although the San Quentin jute mill was the first job assignment for all new prisoners, white prisoners tended to earn their way to jobs for those who showed signs of rehabilitation much more frequently than did black or Mexican inmates, who were assigned to a series of lesser jobs.<sup>54</sup>

The end of the Great Depression did not mark an end to brutal prison conditions. In fact, through the 1950's inmates were "regularly caged and chained" and after a succession of prison riots around the country, one of which took place in Angola, the United Nations stepped in and created the "United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners" in 1955.<sup>55</sup> The rules set forth certain baseline conditions to be met universally in prisons such as, "respect for prisoners' inherent dignity and value as human beings," and "medical and health services."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Barrows, 204.

<sup>52</sup> Anne-Marie Cusac, "Doing Time in the Depression: Everyday Life in Texas and California Prisons by Ethan Blue," *TriQuarley*, January 23, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Cusac.

<sup>54</sup> Cusac.

<sup>55</sup> "History," *Center for Prison Reform*, <https://centerforprisonreform.org/history/>.

<sup>56</sup> General Assembly resolution 70/175, *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*, A/RES/70/175 (17 December 2015), available from <https://www.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/1957/06/ENG.pdf>.



The 1950's and this document finally signify another turn back towards some type of prison reform.

The 1960's and 1970's were characterized by the juxtaposition of intense conservatism and progressive thought and protest, but it also was another period of prison reform. One of the most highly regarded of these, French philosopher Michel Foucault, wrote in 1979 about this reform in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault argues that punishment changed from being a gruesome public spectacle in earlier times to being a type of discipline through reforming the criminal. Although the method of imprisonment had shifted, the fundamental approach to imprisonment wasn't all so different. Foucault does not necessarily argue this is as progressive though writing, "the point was not to punish less, but to punish better."<sup>57</sup> This is seen most clearly in the "panopticon." A panoptic prison had individual cells for prisoners circled around a large observation tower in the center where one person was able to watch many at one time, "[the inmates] must always assume that they are being observed. The result is that we 'induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."<sup>58</sup> Foucault's observations shed light on the idea that although prisons were changing, it was not in a progressive or trusting way continued to assume inmates were inherently bad or doing something as opposed to placing any trust in them.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century incarceration exploded and along with it a growth in the unforgiving American approach to imprisonment. Michelle Alexander, in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, argues prison in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century became a tool or guise for a modern form of slavery. The "New Jim Crow" represents the rise of

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<sup>57</sup> Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short History*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77.

<sup>58</sup> Gutting, 81.

mass incarceration, especially of African-American citizens, which came to fruition starting in the 1960's. Politicians referred to the large amount of unemployed African-American youth as "dynamite" waiting to explode and as "potentially the most dangerous social condition in America today."<sup>59</sup> With this rhetoric came a War on Poverty, a political war waged to demonize African American men and imprison them in large numbers. As scholar Elizabeth Hinton writes, "youth crime was more of a moral concern rooted in long-held racial fears than it was a measurable problem."<sup>60</sup> The War on Poverty generated fear everywhere from police officers to citizens and resulted in an uptick in arrest, an intolerant approach to imprisonment and crime, and the subsequent arrests and convictions of African-American men to numbers never before seen, even for petty behavior such as "cursing, shouting and throwing various objects."<sup>61</sup>

The 1960's rolled into the 1970's and the Kennedy administration turned into the Johnson administration. Continuing the harsh and racialized nature of sentencing, New York, Governor John D. Rockefeller instituted the Rockefeller Drug Laws which transitioned the War on Poverty into the War on Drugs. His laws, "broke new ground by instituting harsh, inflexible, penalties" on those who carried various types of drugs, especially targeting those with crack cocaine as opposed to powder, a law which inherently targeted inner city communities and therefore African Americans. Instead of initiating programming to help those in need or rehabilitate those dealing with drugs, politicians at this time approached crime in a pitiless and punitive way. Reagan steered this War on Drugs throughout the 1980's boasting a new practice, "mandatory minimums," a legal sentence for drug crimes automatically guaranteeing certain

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<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 29.

<sup>60</sup> Hinton, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Hinton, 36.

minimum sentences regardless of age, sex, time and place. Crack cocaine, a drug primarily used in lower-income neighborhoods with predominantly people of color, held much more severe mandatory minimums than powder cocaine minimums, inherently targeting people of color. These laws ballooned the prison population in America to levels unheard of, with the populations of these prisons disproportionately filled by Black men. For instance, in “California, African Americans are only 7% of the general population but make up 28 percent of the prison population and 45 percent of those serving life.”<sup>62</sup>

With the prison population boom and hordes of new able-bodied young men now sitting in jails serving alarmingly long sentences—business entrepreneurs saw this as an opportunity. Although prison labor had always been in practice, it now blossomed into something much larger: the prison industrial complex. Many states opted to build private prisons. Inmates were now put to work laboring for private companies and helping them turn over large profits. CCA/CoreCivic (Corrections Corporation of America) and Geo Group were and remain today to be the two primary private prison operators in America. CCA and Geo, “hold people captive for a profit” and depend on all of their beds being filled in order to make the most money.<sup>63</sup> The sway these companies have is strong, in certain cases they even exert political influence as many politicians are invested in them. One of these, ALEC (The American Legislative Exchange Council), known as a powerful corporate lobby, “ghostwrites legislation to benefit their businesses,” a disturbing fact given they are intertwined with at least a dozen companies that do prison business.<sup>64</sup> This entire system is the prison industrial complex, defined by the *Atlantic* as

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<sup>62</sup> James Kilgore, *Understanding Mass Incarceration: The People’s Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle of Our Time*, (New York, NY: The New Press, 2015) 54.

<sup>63</sup> Alexander, 231.

<sup>64</sup> Donna Selman and Paul Leighton, *Punishment for Sale: Private Prisons, Big Business, and the Incarceration Binge*, (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 100.

“a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need.”<sup>65</sup> Mandatory minimums and the profits being raised by them forced the expansion of prisons to sizes never before seen. Almost four hundred years after the first convicts arrived to America from Britain to perform labor while serving their time, convicts were once again back in the same position. The retributive nature of America’s approach to imprisonment had come full circle—and not in a positive way.

Today, over 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the United States, an increase of about 500% over the last forty years.<sup>66</sup> Those incarcerated for a drug offense has risen 1,100% since 1980.<sup>67</sup> Per every 100,000 people in America, 2,613 Black men are incarcerated, 1,043 Latino men are incarcerated and 457 White men are incarcerated.<sup>68</sup> These disparities in general population vs. prison population are jarring and reveal a scary and ultimately racist truth about the American prison system today. Arguably even more disturbing about the current state of the prison system is, however, is its failure to progress. From starving and hanging of inmates, to convict transportation, to convict labor and leasing, to solitary confinement: the American prison has a long, dark, and twisted history, but, unlike most things which get better over time, the U.S. prison system has not. Freedom of inmates in the United States is, and always has been, essentially non-existent, but even more appalling is the failure of the American political and economic system to care about the treatment of their own citizens, profiting off of their exploitation. In the words of Michelle Alexander, “new tactics have been used for achieving the

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<sup>65</sup> Eric Schlosser, “The Prison-Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, 1988, December.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/the-prison-industrial-complex/304669/>.

<sup>66</sup> “Trends in U.S. Corrections.” *The Sentencing Project*. June, 2017.

<https://sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Trends-in-US-Corrections.pdf>, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Alexander, 60.

<sup>68</sup> *The Sentencing Project*, 5.

same goals,” the prison system has not reformed or been made better over time, but, if anything, has remained stagnant, a punitive system benefitting off of its targets, which Burl Cain seeks to break in Angola.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Religious Rehabilitation: Breaking from Angola's Retribution

The history of The Louisiana State Penitentiary is one characterized by brutality, racism, and a sense of monotony and antiquity echoing that of the history of the American prison. As author Matthew Mancini writes, “They [Parchman and Angola] are places of unremitting labor in unbearable heat, of unrequited loneliness, and of the ever-present possibility of a violent resolution of the most insignificant dispute.”<sup>69</sup> From its foundation as a large-scale slave plantation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to its transition into an epicenter of convict leasing to then functioning as a hub of anti-progressive activity during the otherwise progressive era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to being home of series of disturbingly violent revolts in the 1950’s to holding over 6,000 men and being the size of Manhattan by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—Angola’s history has been far from progressive. These four phases of Angola’s history are different expressions of a deeply engrained violence which has permeated Angola since its inception. Angola’s history is a tangible example of a prison characterized by hopelessness and violence; a tool by which slave-like practices are continued under the law. Later in this chapter I will argue that Burl Cain, initiated as warden in 1995, is able to begin, through religious and moral rehabilitation, to divert the prison from its gruesome, violent, and retributive history: paving the way to a new and arguably radical approach to southern imprisonment, in a fifth phase of Angola’s history.

The land which now comprises Angola Prison was originally purchased by Isaac Franklin, a prominent slave-owner in Louisiana in the 1840’s. Franklin’s slaves, “cut sugar cane and pick cotton,” among other tasks for hours in the blistering sun with little or no payment.<sup>70</sup> After the

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<sup>69</sup> Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South 1866-1928*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 151.

<sup>70</sup> Mancini, 136.

Civil War Isaac Franklin's wife sold their family plantations to a former confederate soldier named Samuel Lawrence James in 1880. The treatment of these laboring bodies worsened under the private rule of convict lease extraordinaire Samuel James. Author James Lee Burke describes this period of time,

The convict lease system at Angola Plantation, which became the prototype for the exploitation of cheap labor throughout the postbellum south, lasted until the beginning of the twentieth century. The starvation and beating and murder by prison personnel of both black and white convicts at Angola Farm was legendary well into modern times. The bodies that are buried in the levee rimming the prison farm remain unmarked and unacknowledged to this day.<sup>71</sup>

By 1880 Samuel James had become "Louisiana's dominant postbellum lessee..."<sup>72</sup> He moved all of his convicts to the Louisiana State Penitentiary which, at the time, was 8,000 acres of farmable land.<sup>73</sup> Convict leasing shows the early stages of a retributive and, frankly, corrupt approach to imprisonment in Angola, "In general, it made no difference to white legislators how James worked the convicts or where, so long as the penitentiary was not the state's responsibility."<sup>74</sup> Angola Penitentiary was massive but inmates were "packed into barracks without blankets or linens," with meals being scarce and barely edible.<sup>75</sup>

Convict leasing allowed rich white landowners to continue having their land worked without also claiming ownership or taking care of the bodies working the land. Because of this disposability of working bodies, conditions were often worse than when these people were

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<sup>71</sup> James Lee Burke, *White Doves at Morning*, (New York: Gallery Publishing Group, 2013), 305.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Carleton, *Politics and Punishment: The History of the Louisiana State Penal System*, (Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press: 1971), 19.

<sup>73</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 19: Violence*. (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 200.

<sup>74</sup> Carleton, 23.

<sup>75</sup> Wood, 200.

enslaved. Louisiana between 1870-1901 was “infamous” for its brutality, “The Prison Board of Control reported that 216 convicts died during the year 1896 alone and it estimated that as many as three thousand men, women, and children convicts (most of them Black) died from over-work, exposure, brutality, and outright murder.”<sup>76</sup> Of Angola’s four historical phases, convict leasing may well be the worst: in the 1890’s the death rate in Angola was four times that of any other state.<sup>77</sup>

After a century as a slave plantation and a private convict leasing establishment, in 1901 Angola Prison was finally put in the hands of the Louisiana government. Some thought this would be the beginning of a new era, a period of prison reform, maybe even a reformatory approach similar to some northern states. The Progressive Era and its notoriety for social reform, however, barely grazed the Louisiana prison system. As scholar Liam Kennedy writes,

Angola became a state penitentiary (or penal farm or plantation prison) [in 1901]. Yet prisoners continued to work long, hard hours in the fields under the threat of physical violence. In other words, this was a change “in name only” as James’ strategy informed the approach to corrections in Louisiana for decades after the end of the lease—predominantly black prisoners were still ‘crowded into large wooden buildings and work[ed] from sunup to sundown in sugar cane and cotton fields—rain or shine, 12-14 hours a day, seven days a week.’<sup>78</sup>

Starting as 8,000 acres in 1901 the prison’s size more than doubled in 1922 when the state purchased 10,000 more acres of land to expand the size of the prison.<sup>79</sup> This began a new era, in the mid 1920’s, what I call “anti-progressivism.” William Saddler, a famous inmate at Angola, writes, “the era had begun, the era of murder, graft, corruption, maiming, and brutality,

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<sup>76</sup> Wilbert Rideau, *Life Sentences: Rage and Survival Behind Bars*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1992), 36.

<sup>77</sup> Wood, 200.

<sup>78</sup> Kennedy, 139.

<sup>79</sup> Wilber Miller, *The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America A-De*, (California: Sage Publishing, 2012), 1045.



all to the end that Angola might become self supporting- a financial pride to the state, but a dark and sinister blot which literally dripped with the blood of its victims.”<sup>80</sup> The prison and those in its charge had once again declined the path of reform. Angola was barreling full-speed down a violent and anti-rehabilitative road.

After the Great Depression in the 1930’s, Angola’s staff and budget suffered. The number of employees at the facility was reduced from 150 to 50 and the trusty system was set into place, an arrangement where “trustworthy” inmates were armed with weapons to fill vacant positions.<sup>81</sup> Theoretically the new system would help cut costs and maybe even promote good behavior, but the arrangement backfired: “inmate and institutionalized violence at Angola skyrocketed, and by 1952 working conditions and abuse had grown to such a level that 31 inmates slashed their Achilles tendons in protest.”<sup>82</sup> Inmates severed their tendons partly in protest but also to avoid working in the fields; an act demonstrating just how horrific the field labor was, “[cutting the tendon] sent the muscle flapping up into the calf like a window shade snapped up by its spring. Painful as it was, heel-stringing kept them from the fields—and from the bat.”<sup>83</sup>

Although minimal reforms were attempted, the reality of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century laid in the fact that those with the power to make a change did not care to, thus, the violence and chaos within Angola did not subside. Between 1964 to 1968 eight different wardens attempted and

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<sup>80</sup> William Sadler, “Ex-Inmate Tells of Brutalities,” *Angola Museum*, <http://www.angolamuseum.org/history/archived-articles/hell-on-angola-the-wooden-ear-series/ex-inmate-tells-of-brutalities>, 1943.

<sup>81</sup> Wood, 200.

<sup>82</sup> Wood, 200.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph T. Hallinan, *Going up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation*, (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003), 23.

failed to take control of the prison.<sup>84</sup> Simultaneously, a high number of executions were taking place in the electric chair at Angola, another facet of the punitive approach to punishment that continued to permeate the prison. Between 1957 to 1991, “Gruesome Gertie,” as it was nicknamed, killed 87 inmates at Angola.<sup>85</sup> Wilbert Rideau, a former inmate at Angola, describes the year 1973 writing,

Men slept with steel plates and JCPenney catalogues tied to their chests; even in maximum-security cellblocks, men slept with their doors tied and with blankets tied around their bunks as a means of protection and security. Angola was a lawless jungle, without order or discipline...From 1972 to 1975, 40 prisoners were stabbed to death and 350 more seriously injured by knife wounds.<sup>86</sup>

It was clear that Angola, from the time of its inception as a plantation more than 100 years earlier, was and continued to be interlaced relentlessly with violence, unrest, and retaliation. Not until 1974 when a Judge named Gordon West who observed the conditions at Angola wrote, “[the conditions here] would shock the conscience of a civilized society,” did a new and somewhat promising warden, C. Paul Phelps, take over.

C. Paul Phelps, a social worker and former parole officer, took the reins at Angola in 1976. Phelps was the first example, although brief, of deviation from the retributive norm of Angola’s approach to imprisonment. From 1976 to 1981 and again from 1984-1988 Phelps ruled over Angola, for the first time without a violent iron fist; Phelps’s approach to imprisonment was unlike anything Louisiana had seen before. Wilbert Rideau chronicles Phelps’s rule in his book *Life Sentences*, “[Phelps] was not glued to tradition or to any particular school of penal thought. He was always open to new ideas, rejecting nothing until its possible applications had been

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<sup>84</sup> Rideau, 41.

<sup>85</sup> Miller, 525.

<sup>86</sup> Rideau, 41.

considered.”<sup>87</sup> Under Phelps’s leadership there was a “encouragement of freedom of expression, honest and meaningful communication between inmates and administrators, and inmate accessibility to official hierarchy.”<sup>88</sup>

After Phelps, however, Angola returned to its deeply-engrained violent environment. The 1980’s and 1990’s brought a wave of arrests, convictions, and sentences, stunting the progressive efforts of Phelps. Angola’s sheer size became hard to manage. In 1997 alone, almost 900 men were sent to Angola, more than half had life sentences, 77% of these were African-American.<sup>89</sup> When Burl Cain took over in 1995 there were very few rehabilitative efforts in place and President Bill Clinton’s recent crime bill had removed prisons from the institutions able to access educational Pell Grants.<sup>90</sup> Angola’s vicious history, the recent removal of federal funding, and the swelling of the prison population all would lend to a warden who would surely continue the anti-rehabilitative and rigid approach to imprisonment in Angola, or so people thought. Burl Cain, however, through religion, was able to turn the tide of Angola in a way no one expected.

### **Enter Burl Cain**

Today at Angola inmates continue to labor in the fields, a vision eerily similar to Isaac Franklin’s plantation three centuries earlier. Over 90% of inmates are serving life sentences, and the prison’s sheer size, nearly 6,300 people, are all facets of a system reflecting the horrors of mass incarceration in America. Many of these problems, however, are not reflections of those running Angola itself but of America’s approach to criminal justice today. For instance, “Louisiana is one of six states where all life sentences are handed down without the chance of

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<sup>87</sup> Rideau, 41.

<sup>88</sup> Rideau, 50.

<sup>89</sup> *The Farm*, directed by Liz Garbus and Jonathan Stack, (1998; United States), 5:10.

<sup>90</sup> Goldberg.

ever going before a parole board. First and second degree murderers automatically receive life without parole, on the guilty votes of as few as 10 or 12 jurors.”<sup>91</sup> This isn’t a law that can be changed by a prison warden. Louisiana’s criminal justice system is purely retributive. When looking at the rehabilitative efforts of a warden like Burl Cain in Louisiana, keeping in mind the structures in place is important in understanding the limited work he has the ability to do. How does a prison warden reconcile the fact that nearly 12 percent of Louisiana inmates, more than 4,500 people, are serving life without parole—the highest proportion in the nation?<sup>92</sup> Is it possible for someone in charge of a population with no hope of release to create an environment that isn’t filled with despair and violence?

For almost the entirety of Angola’s history, save perhaps a short period of time with Phelps in charge, wardens at Angola have approached punishment in a retributive, violent, and unforgiving manner. Opportunities for rehabilitation or reform have been few and far between. Thus, the inauguration of Warden Burl Cain in 1995, was not an occasion people assumed would change Angola’s approach to imprisonment, especially with a political rhetoric and climate demonizing criminals: “lock them up,” and “three strikes you’re out.” With the sharp rise in incarceration, numerous factors were working against new or humanizing methods of incarceration. When Burl Cain arrived at Angola, however, he did something unexpected.

America has long opposed any type of church and state relationship. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution proclaims, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”<sup>93</sup> With Burl Cain, however,

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<sup>91</sup> Cindy Chang, “Angola Inmates Are Taught Life Skills, Then Spend Their Lives Behind Bars,” *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA) May 15, 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Chang.

<sup>93</sup> “United States of America 1789,” *Constitute Project*, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United\\_States\\_of\\_America\\_1992](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_States_of_America_1992).

“coloring every decision he makes, are the moral teachings of his religion.”<sup>94</sup> This chapter is not intended to present a “pro-Burl Cain” argument, and it will not argue Burl Cain did not do anything wrong, in fact Cain has been accused of illegally employing inmates on his private land. This chapter also does not seek to argue that Angola Prison was even remotely a perfect place by the time Burl Cain left in 2015. In fact, Burl Cain’s continuation of exploitative labor practices have been widely criticized and lawsuits have been filed against his employment of inmates on his own private properties. This chapter, however, will focus on a separate aspect of Cain’s rule: the way Cain brought religion into Angola at a time when most other programming had been taken away, creating the Angola Prison Seminary, an accredited institution which focused on rehabilitating and educating inmates. The Angola Prison Seminary and Cain’s religious and moral philosophy transformed the course of Angola’s history. While the previous four phases of Angola’s history have been plagued by a violent, retaliatory, “eye for an eye” approach, Cain’s twenty-year wardenship began to change this sequence. Ignoring claims that church and state must never overlap, Cain brought religion into the prison, what he believed was the last possible hope for the deteriorating criminal justice and prison system. Burl Cain’s aim was to “give hope where there’s hopelessness,” to focus on the “soul” of the individual, and to give inmates optimism in ways many thought were not possible.<sup>95</sup> First, I will outline Burl Cain’s philosophy of moral rehabilitation and then I will focus on the various ways this philosophy altered inmates’ values, transformed the power dynamic between guards and inmates, and revamped the approach to imprisonment at Angola, and greater Louisiana, in a radical way.

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<sup>94</sup> Michael Glover, “The Christian Warden,” *The Angolite*, March/April 1995, 20.

<sup>95</sup> Paul Von Zielbauer, “Spinning Hope on Incarceration Station,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 12, 2006.

As previous writing and scholarly work shows, throughout history religion has been used in many different ways: both to justify harsh retributive punishment and to champion rehabilitative action. Burl Cain's leadership, from 1995-2015, marks a fifth phase of the prisons history, breaking away from the previous tradition of retributive imprisonment and offering something extraordinarily new, what Cain calls "moral rehabilitation." Cain, when he took on the position as warden, discussed his philosophy with *The Angolite*, the award-winning prison news magazine run by inmates at Angola,

"I studied the recidivism rates and realized that nothing was helping. Harsh treatment or soft treatment, long sentences or early parole, none of it effected those rates. I came to the conclusion that rehabilitation is a *moral*, not a social, phenomenon. The only thing that helps is when you change a man's soul...Even if I was an atheist I'd still want religion in the prison because the side-effects are peace and harmony."<sup>96</sup>

It is easy to misunderstand the amount of power a prison warden actually has. Although Prison wardens are not politicians, they also are not legislatures: their power is limited. The "Correctional Officer Education" website lists some of the tasks of a prison warden. Of these tasks required of Prison Wardens are things such as "coordinating prison staff employment," "overseeing inmate programs," "monitoring the operations of the institution," "adhering to state regulations and legislation."<sup>97</sup> This list lacks a mention of action words such as "implement" or "initiate." The wardens primary task is to oversee, to make sure things run smoothly, to follow the rules and make sure everyone else is as well: it is not in a prison warden's rulebook to initiate major changes.

So what exactly did Burl Cain initiate at Angola? In his first years at the prison, Cain observed the lack of adequate rehabilitation programming within the prison following the repeal

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<sup>96</sup> Glover, 21.

<sup>97</sup> "Career and Salary Information for Correctional Administrators," *CorrectionalOfficerEDU.org*, <https://www.correctionalofficeredu.org/jail-administrator/>.

of Pell Grants for prisoners in 1994. First, Cain adopted a “Unit Management Structure,” which allowed for more contact between inmates and staff, placing inmates in close proximity to staff in hopes of enhancing the quality of relationships between the two groups instead of having a constant hierarchy and imbalanced power dynamic.<sup>98</sup> Although not inherently religious in its nature, The Unit Management structure imposed a different warden, a “mini-warden,” in each camp running their own operations which helped with a more thorough understanding to each area of the prison. Thus there were more appropriate solutions to the different issues which would arise from camp to camp. Some, such as Deputy Warden Peabody, believes The Unit Management Structure, and not Cain’s religious programming, was the most important change the Warden made in his time at Angola because of how it enhanced inmate-staff relationships and produced some semblance of trust between the two groups.<sup>99</sup>

One of Burl Cain’s most dramatic and radical introductions was the Angola Prison Seminary. Cain sought out the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS), a prominent educational institution in Louisiana, to propose they start a “bible college” branch at Angola, which they did soon after with outside donations.<sup>100</sup> Although religiously affiliated, NOBTS is much more than an institution which imposes religion or brainwashes inmates. NOBTS is a four-year accredited undergraduate college, offering courses in Greek and Hebrew among other subjects.<sup>101</sup> At Angola they offer degrees in theology, sociology, and general studies.<sup>102</sup> In a video clip of a NOBTS classroom at Angola, a student has an “Assessment of Childhood

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<sup>98</sup> Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, Duwe, 10.

<sup>99</sup> Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, Duwe, 10.

<sup>100</sup> Erik Eckholm, “Bible College Helps Some at Louisiana Prison Find Peace,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), October 5, 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Cain & Fontenot.

<sup>102</sup> Eckholm.

Disorders” and an “Abnormal Psychology” textbook on his desk.<sup>103</sup> The program is open to both religious and non-religious inmates. In a somewhat controversial statement, Cain expressed why he feels religion is as important, if not more, than academic learning, “I realized that I could teach them to read and write, could help them learn skills and a trade—but without moral rehabilitation, I would only be creating a smarter criminal...moral people are not criminals. That’s why moral rehabilitation is the only true rehabilitation.”<sup>104</sup> A strong statement, Cain’s message is clear in that religious/moral rehabilitation through the Angola Prison Seminary would be the most effective way to better the inmates inside his doors. In the rest of this chapter I will examine the ways in which Cain’s seminary and religious promotion changed the prison. I will argue the seminary and religion helped push the prison towards racial equality, helped create new educational opportunities, worked towards changing inmates’ personal and moral identities and views towards their imprisonment, and lastly transformed physical spaces and weakened the harsh power dynamic between prisoners and guards.

Race is and always has been intertwined with the United States criminal justice system. Especially permeating the southern United States, race and racism play a large part in opportunities one has both presently and historically, from housing to education to employment opportunities. Angola prison is a tangible representation of the unequal racial structures which persist in America and especially in prisons. Angola embodies the ways in which religion, as integrated by Burl Cain, can work against these racial divisions. When Cain took over in 1995,

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<sup>103</sup> John Robson, “Angola Prison Story: Part 1, John Robson,” Vimeo video, 29:13, May 15, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/217559694>.

<sup>104</sup> Charlie Adams, “The ‘On Fire’ Attitude and Leadership of Warden Burl Cain,” *HottyToddy.com*, December 3, 2013, <https://hottytoddy.com/2013/12/03/the-on-fire-attitude-and-leadership-of-warden-burl-cain/>.



80% of the prison's population was Black and all of the prison chaplains were white.<sup>105</sup> One of his first moves as warden was to enact a 12-week prison-wide Bible study program, *Experiencing God*, which he ran by recruiting volunteers from outside the prison. *Experiencing God* allowed for inmates to take a course and then, after graduating, act as moderators to other inmates, putting many formerly powerless inmates into positions of authority.<sup>106</sup> As the course began Burl Cain hired two new chaplains, one of them a black Muslim.<sup>107</sup> Although the Bible College promotes Christianity, Burl Cain ensured freedom of religion for Muslim inmates at Angola as well. Although there are still cases filed against Cain for not providing great enough variety in services for these inmates, their privileges have expanded largely since before Cain's wardenship. Before Cain, inmates would often have to break their fast for Ramadan with cornflakes while they now have specific meals held for them.<sup>108</sup> Although subtle, these small changes slowly but surely began to break down segregatory barriers which had persisted since Angola's time as a slave plantation.

NOBTS is criticized often because people fear it hinders freedom of religion. No program is perfect and although NOBTS is Baptist focused, the program does not turn away those of other faiths. Though Baptists are the majority of the students,

... They are not the majority; non-denominational students outnumber them nearly two-to-one. Furthermore, Catholic students actually outnumber the Pentecostal students often given such prominence among descriptions of Angola's so-called "bapticoctal" religious culture. Finally, Islam has a significant representation among NOBTS students at Angola, rivaling that of both Catholics and Pentecostals. Several Muslim graduates of NOBTS serve as inmate ministers as an expression of their Muslim faith.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, Duwe, 7.

<sup>106</sup> Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, Duwe, 12.

<sup>107</sup> Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, Duwe, 12.

<sup>108</sup> Tanya Erzen, *God In Captivity: Redemption and Punishment in America's Faith-Based Prisons*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017), 101.

<sup>109</sup> Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, Duwe, 173.

Before Cain established the Prison Seminary at Angola and before the removal of Pell Grants for inmates, education programming at Angola was run by an outside institution: The Northwest Missouri Community College. This program had 49 students enrolled in it when it was shut down in 1994.<sup>110</sup> When Pell Grants were removed, all 49 of these inmates immediately stopped receiving an education within Angola. In 2011, the NOBTS “Seminary News” newsletter described the 120 inmates enrolled in the Angola Prison Seminary, a number tripling those educated in the prison before.<sup>111</sup> In a *New York Times* article published in 2013, Erik Eckholm writes that there are, “241 graduates so far,” of the Angola Prison Seminary, a small but nevertheless significant number when compared to the 0 inmates receiving education after the removal of the Pell grants.<sup>112</sup> A study done in 2014 by Michael Hallett, et. al., highlights the races of these graduating students from the Seminary: 176 Black graduates and 77 White (along with 1 Asian and 1 Indian graduate).<sup>113</sup> Although race statistics on students from the earlier educational programs (pre-Burl Cain) are not available, their new accessibility, at the very least, shows a move towards more racial awareness within and outside of the prison. There are more than double the amount of Black graduates than White, lending to the idea that the educational programming within Angola does not discriminate on the basis of race, a shift from much of Angola’s history. Without the establishment of the Seminary by Warden Cain one can not assume there would have been any graduates of any educational program in 2013 but instead there were 241.

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<sup>110</sup> “Inside Angola,” *The Angolite*, March/April 1995, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Diana Chandler, “Seminary’s Angola Extension Center Featured in NAMB Documentary,” *New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary*, 2010.

<sup>112</sup> Eckholm.

<sup>113</sup> Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, Duwe, 72.

The racial and ethnic distribution in Angola is largely split between White and Black inmates, however Hispanic inmates still constitute an important population at the prison. In one of Warden Cain's final years before his resignation in 2015, *The Angolite* published an article discussing the establishment of a new bilingual church at Angola, "A House of Their Own: Hispanics form a new church for English and Spanish-speaking worshippers." A few of the Hispanic graduates of the NOBTS program at Angola, notably Rudy Martinez and Leo Piñeyro, joined together to create a new church at the prison, "Voice of Hope Church/Iglesia Voz de Esperanza," after Burl Cain approved the charter.<sup>114</sup> Iglesia Voz de Esperanza was to be the first bilingual church at Angola, a milestone for the Spanish speaking inmates at the prison. Hispanics are the third largest demographic at Angola and Martinez and Piñeyro's establishment of Iglesia Voz de Esperanza illustrates religion giving resources to a sect of the population previously denied access. At least fifty inmates participated in the bilingual church by the time it officially became recognized by Burl Cain in 2013.<sup>115</sup> Not only was the new bilingual church opening religious doors for a previously invisible part of the prison community, but the bilingual church went beyond just preaching to actually teaching and educating those who attended— "Martinez and Piñeyro assist most non-English-speaking Latinos with basic English education and discipleship courses once a week."<sup>116</sup> Although the Spanish-speaking inmates do not constitute the largest section of the inmate population, the effects of the teachings of this new church are not to be ignored. As *The Angolite* writes in 2014, "More than 90 percent of the Hispanic population at Angola lacks a high school education. Most struggle with English as a second language and the communication barrier between security and Hispanic inmates has been

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<sup>114</sup> Jaime Maduro, "A House of Their Own," *The Angolite*, January/February 2014, 69.

<sup>115</sup> Maduro, 69.

<sup>116</sup> Maduro, 70.

challenging. Through Spanish interpreters and inmate ministers the gaps have been slowly bridged.”<sup>117</sup> Martinez and Piñeyro, with the help of Burl Cain, opened doors for Hispanic inmates through the bilingual church, giving these inmates tools for learning they had previously been denied. Iglesia Voz de Esperanza gives educational and religious opportunities to inmates who may never before have had them, either within or outside of the prison. A Kentucky college student, Becker, visited Angola prison in 2014 to examine the dynamics of religion within the prison. Becker describes his experience at the Episcopal church in Angola, “this one stands out as one where there is so much diversity, culturally, ethnically, socio-economically. There are so many different people, all in the same church.”<sup>118</sup>

While Burl Cain’s religious reforms within Angola worked as a tool to bridge gaps between various ethnic and racial groups previously segregated against within Angola, the seminary and Burl Cain’s religious reforms had many other effects. Angola Prison gains its notoriety largely because 90% of the inmates are “lifers,” meaning from the moment they enter the prison they will be inside of the prison for the rest of their life.<sup>119</sup> Entering a new place knowing you will never leave carries incredible and existential weight, a weight which can be mentally and emotionally crippling. Across the board inmates describe feelings of hopelessness and despair when faced with the reality of their sentence. Numerous scientific studies have been conducted on attempting to understand and measure how hopelessness levels can be affected by various programming within prisons.<sup>120</sup> Here, I will argue Burl Cain’s religious programming/moral

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<sup>117</sup> Maduro, 70.

<sup>118</sup> Jaime Maduro, “Confirming Faith,” *The Angolite*, January/February 2014, 67.

<sup>119</sup> Mike Scott, “Angola Prison Through the Years: A Visual History of the Louisiana State Penitentiary,” *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA) November 3, 2016.

<sup>120</sup> Nurullah Emir Ekinici & Cetin Ozdilek, “Hopelessness Level of Prisoners according to Their Level of Making Sport,” *International Conference on Law, Education and Humanities*, Phuket, Thailand, April 9-10, 2015; Emma J. Palmer & Rachael Connelly, “Depression, Hopelessness

rehabilitation succeeds in creating a moral shift within many inmates at Angola. Cain once described his views towards the inmates he works with, “we can hate the sin. I hate what you did. But we don’t have to hate the sinner. We are supposed to love the sinner. And we are supposed to forgive if we want to be forgiven.”<sup>121</sup> Cain’s view of prisoners and their crimes breaks in tradition with much popular opinion of those in power before and during his time as warden. Even politicians at the time failed often to differentiate a “sinner” from their “sin—this was obvious in a speech by Hilary Clinton on “super predators,” calling criminals people with “no conscience, no empathy.”<sup>122</sup> Ronald Reagan, a few years earlier, called offenders a “hardened criminal class” and that “evil is frequently a conscious choice and that retribution must be swift and sure for those who decide to make a career of preying on the innocent.”<sup>123</sup> These retributive ideas of punishment countered the rehabilitative nature of what Burl Cain worked towards within Angola. Cain’s ideas, although religiously inspired, urged that inmates *were* more than their worse crime. And, most importantly, Cain’s prophecy turned out to be true—these moral shifts due to practicing religion proved to be successful in rehabilitating inmates. Writings and poetry from various issues of *The Angolite* and personal interviews with inmates shed light on the moral shift in inmates and a change in personal identity due to their participation in Cain’s religious programming.

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and Suicide Ideation Among Vulnerable Prisoners,” *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 15, no. 3 (2006). These studies discuss common mental health issues in prison populations and examine in different ways how these emotions are being dealt with.

<sup>121</sup> Keith Elliott, “Death Row Seminar,” *The Angolite*, May/June 1995, 72.

<sup>122</sup> Joseph P. Williams, “Former President Clinton Defends 1996 Crime Bill, ‘Super-Predators’ Remark,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 7, 2016, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-04-07/former-president-clinton-defends-1996-crime-bill-super-predators-remark>.

<sup>123</sup> “Text of President’s Speech on Drive Against Crime,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), October 15, 1982.

*The Angolite*, an inmate founded and run newspaper since 1976, puts out a new issue every two months written by inmates there. Each edition of *The Angolite* has a section at the end titled “Angola Expressions,” a section which the magazine describes as, “In the name of freedom of expression, *The Angolite* devotes this section to original writings by our readers.” These poems and short writings exemplify perhaps the most striking image of religious thought within Angola and its inmates during Burl Cain’s leadership. The vast majority of these poems boast references to God, Jesus, forgiveness, Adam, sin, Christianity, and more. These poems reflect the religious nature which permeates much of the population at Angola, but also shows how religion was used as a means to escape one’s past and begin to change as a person. A poem written by inmate Elgin Dennis, “A Ghetto Child,” sheds light on the importance of Christ in him getting on the right path, “Dear God, I come to you weak/ And ask that you make me strong...It’s like I shot dice with the Anti-Christ/And it cost me my Life.”<sup>124</sup> Later in the poem Dennis writes, “But it is true that you even love us street dudes/You never change your moods,” a reference to the sureness and trust many feel with God as opposed to, perhaps, a politician whose views are artificial and constantly changing. Religion and a belief in a larger destiny can have an unparalleled power for people, especially someone incarcerated with few other resources than their belief system. For Elgin Dennis, belief in God is a figure that was able to give him strength to deal with his sentence.

Dwane McKinney, another Angola inmate, writes a short original writing describing this in “Recreating Myself.” McKinney writes, “There is always a bright side to every reality, and I will focus your attention on this. When we know and understand the hell of our set of circumstances,

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<sup>124</sup> Elgin Dennis, “A Ghetto Child,” *The Angolite*, May/June 2002.

we are one step closer to laying the foundation of the heaven that Christ says exist within.”<sup>125</sup>

McKinney’s writing references the way a belief in God works as a tool which help inmates escape the misery they feel when behind bars by bringing them to a positive place within themselves.

“The Tears of Men” written by inmate Emanuel Randall sheds light on the moral rehabilitation he was undergoing while incarcerated. Randall writes about his past life, “I must shed a tear for my prior ignorance and stupidity,” and about his present life, “I must also shed a tear for being blessed by God with the knowledge and wisdom to overcome my faults and move forward with my life.”<sup>126</sup> Randall writes, “I will continue to instill God’s consciousness and righteousness in my everyday life the same as I once instilled foolishness and hatred in my everyday life.”<sup>127</sup> Randall’s poetry represents a personal shift in self confidence and self-worth, denoting himself as, “stupid” and “ignorant,” before his incarceration while his present situation as a believer in God is, “righteous” and “conscious.” Both McKinney and Randall’s writing mark a positive shift in personal views or feelings about themselves and their incarceration.

Substance abuse issues are common among inmates—often serving as a reason for incarceration. One poem, written in 2002 by inmate Aaron Neville, “If I Shed A Tear,” discusses Jesus and the power he has over Neville’s life, especially in healing him from his struggles with addiction. A section from Neville’s poem is below,

Sometimes we do things in the dark

And think that no one sees us

But there’s someone who loves us all

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<sup>125</sup> Dwayne McKinney, “Recreating Myself,” *The Angolite*, March/April 2014, 68-69.

<sup>126</sup> Emanuel Randall, “The Tears of Men,” *The Angolite*, July/August 2000, 62.

<sup>127</sup> Randall, 62.

I believe they call him Jesus

He looks at us all in the same light

One's not better than the other

He wants us to live with peace on earth

And to stop fighting with our brother

I believe that we're all God's little children

And some of us have sometimes gone astray

So that's why God sent down

His son named Jesus with his eyes of fire

So that He may show the way

My life has been so beautiful since I met Him

And I took Him for the Saviour of my soul

And to walk down that straight and narrow

With peace on earth is my goal<sup>128</sup>

Neville's poetry notes the shift he felt after "meeting" Jesus Christ and the importance Jesus's love had for him in both his good and bad times. America's criminal justice system is monochromatic structure, sorting people into either good or bad. Bad people are demonized by society, removed, and put behind bars. Religion offers a way to transcend this simple division

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<sup>128</sup> Aaron Neville, "If I Shed A Tear," *The Angolite*, May/June 2002, 65.



between right and wrong by providing unconditional love to someone, in both their good and bad times. This is what Warden Cain sought to prove as warden. When Neville began believing in God he felt his life become “beautiful” and moved towards “peace,” both features which Neville lacked when he was in the “dark,” before his religious rehabilitation.

Another former inmate who felt religion saved him from substance-abuse issues was Angola inmate Eugene Tanniehill. Tanniehill, originally convicted of murdering a preacher, describes the way his turn to religion saved him from his abusive relationship with alcohol which had driven him towards crime in the first place, “I could see... how God in His goodness and His grace had led me to repentance... I knew my sin had been forgiven—that I did not have to rely on alcohol any longer.”<sup>129</sup> Tanniehill’s turn towards religion freed him from the substances he had depended on for an escape but which had really just driven him towards crime.

Along with inciting a moral or emotional change, religion under Burl Cain worked against long-standing and often damaging or violent power dynamics between prisoner and guard. For Angola’s entire history Angola has been characterized by a harshness and distrust between inmates and guards. From the time Angola was a slave plantation, to the era of convict leasing, through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even today, guards, often white men, can be seen on horses patrolling fields while mostly black workers hunch over performing manual labor.<sup>130</sup> As long as the prison has existed, Angola has been characterized by violence from staff members towards inmates, from inmates towards other inmates, and from inmates towards themselves. Like the unforgiving and retributive nature of the criminal justice system, Angola has mirrored this

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<sup>129</sup> Dennis Shere, *Cain’s Redemption: A Story of Hope and Transformation in America’s Bloodiest Prison*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers), 87.

<sup>130</sup> April Taylor, “Should Prisoners Be Forced into Hard Labor and Paid Two Cents per Hour?” *Financial Juneteenth*, May 16, 2014.

retribution in its history, “those accused of not working hard enough were often beaten with straps, shaved pipes, and spare pieces of lumber.”<sup>131</sup> The way Burl brought religion into the prison and his ideas of forgiveness and rehabilitation, allowed for a shift, albeit partial, in power dynamics within the prison.

Churches and religious spaces in Angola brought about a new type of environment that challenged the norm of using violence to manage the inmates. An interview with Donald Biermann, an inmate who was housed at Angola early in his life and came back for a second sentence in 1999, during Burl’s time as warden, offers an account of the ways religion changed him for the better but also allowed for greater freedom and trust within the prison. Biermann, now an inmate minister, notes that until he came to God, “the only two emotions I experienced for 44 years of my life were hate and indifference.”<sup>132</sup> Biermann had grown up as a violent person which is what had landed him twice in Angola. Biermann describes his old self, “I didn’t believe in God. I’d never believed in God...” and then he describes his awakening to Jesus saying, “I began to cry and I cried and I couldn’t even talk... The hate and bitterness was gone.”<sup>133</sup> Biermann says, “For 44 years everything that I’d believed in crumbled right around my feet and it scared me.”<sup>134</sup> Not only does Biermann describe the intense moral rehabilitation he experiences when he is “awakened” to God, but he discusses the unique way the guards reacted to his “awakening,” as opposed to how they may have acted before Burl Cain’s leadership, “If an inmate, especially an inmate with a past as violent as mine has been or is going through some type of severe emotional trauma, they isolate him. That’s just they put him in the dungeon and

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<sup>131</sup> Scott.

<sup>132</sup> Donald Biermann, “Angola Prison Story: Part 5, Donald Biermann,” Vimeo video, 23:35, May 15, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/217575624>.

<sup>133</sup> Biermann.

<sup>134</sup> Biermann.

that's for his safety...well they didn't bother me, as a matter of fact an order went out not to touch me. Leave him alone."<sup>135</sup> Biermann's experience with God and religion not only changed his own mindset, "I haven't put my hands on anybody in six years," but his awakening may in the past have spurred aggressive and punishing action by guards but instead they stepped away and allowed him to have this experience without punishment. Biermann's awakening experience and the relaxed reaction of the guards marked a shift towards a trusting environment between inmates and guards as opposed to an immediately suspicious or distrusting response.

While Biermann's story sheds light on religion serving as a tool for personal growth and moral change, it also goes one step further, showing a shift in physical behavior among inmates and guards on top of a personal emotional shift. Biermann's story supports the idea that religion was working against unhealthy and harsh dynamics of prison behavior. Oppressive physical spaces, in a similar vain to harsh power dynamics, also are lessened by the practice of religion within the prison. The introduction of religious instruction led to more gatherings in larger open spaces where inmates could move much more freely than in a cell. It also created opportunities for inmates to take on positions of leadership. Compare the image of an average cell block at Angola (Figure 1) to a church setting at Angola (figure 2)

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<sup>135</sup> Biermann.



Figure 1. A row of cells at Angola Prison.<sup>136</sup>



Figure 2. One of the chapels at Angola prison.<sup>137</sup>

Figure 1 shows a series of cells, small in size with little to no potential for communication between inmates. In the photo, an inmate sticks their arm out of the cell,

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<sup>136</sup>Alice Speri, “Deadly Heat in U.S. Prisons is Killing Inmates and Spawning Lawsuits,” August 24, 2016 (Photo taken July 14, 2015), <https://theintercept.com/2016/08/24/deadly-heat-in-u-s-prisons-is-killing-inmates-and-spawning-lawsuits/>.

<sup>137</sup> John Rottman, “Transform This: Could Revival Possibly Come Through the Prison System?” *Commen*, April 12, 2013. <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/3962/transform-this/>.

presumably asking for assistance of some kind from a guard who roams the hallway. Figure 1 portrays a scene where multiple men stand on a stage. No shackles are attached to them; no handcuffs or chains hang from their legs. These men are preaching, speaking into microphones, perhaps singing. A cross is visible on the wall behind the men and on the altar before them. This is a church at Angola, and these are men who at quick glance would not be assumed violent criminals. This isn't to say inmates at Angola are not still housed in cells today—they are. The church and the power of the church, however, has given inmates an escape, even if brief, from the physical confines of their normal cell block. Not all inmates at Angola are housed in solitary cells, but regardless of their dormitory, the conditions are unpleasant and space is severely limited. Numerous lawsuits have been filed against Angola for, “appalling and extreme conditions,” especially in the death row facility, “cell bars that are hot to the touch and inmates sleeping on concrete floor because it is slightly cooler than beds. During summer months, the showers provide no relief as the water temperature sometimes exceeds 115 degrees...”<sup>138</sup> Bearing in mind these disturbing facts, the church environment provides a clear break with not only the power dynamic in the prison but in literally giving inmates physical space and room to breathe.

Although certain inmates are given some authority through the religious programming offered by Burl Cain, this isn't the first instance where inmates have been given authority throughout Angola's history. In the 1960's many inmates were actually given guard roles. Following a financial crisis inmates were given these positions to fill vacant employee spots,

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<sup>138</sup> “Conditions on Death Row: Inmates File Lawsuit Over Extreme Death Row Conditions,” *Death Penalty Information Center*, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/conditions-death-row-inmates-file-lawsuit-over-extreme-death-row-conditions>.

“inmate guards, armed with weapons, still supervise their fellow inmates...”<sup>139</sup> Although inmates may have had power at this point in time, their power was through violence, through weapons and intimidation, as opposed to spreading knowledge and hope. Although guards may have had some semblance of power, their authority was perpetuating retributive policies as they were armed with weapons. Neither rehabilitation of inmates nor any type of reform-like efforts were in sight. Here, at the turn of the century under Burl Cain, we finally begin to see this shift towards the rehabilitation of the criminal come to fruition, more than four decades later.

Graduates of the Bible College who are considered “rehabilitated” are given leadership positions not just in preacher or religious leading roles, but also as mentors for younger inmates,

Staff have been able to use older inmates in orientation programs and as tier walkers...inmate counselor substitutes, tutors and vocational instructors...They are the presidents of many influential and successful inmate organizations, which provide inmates with positive groups to join and to discover and explore their creative abilities. They hold jobs in nearly every area of the prison and compose a significant percentage of those inmates who have earned “trustworthy” status.<sup>140</sup>

While inmate graduates of the Seminary are granted the ability to lead and run programming and services within the prison, Burl Cain’s moral rehabilitation gives leadership position to non-graduates as well. A recent initiative, the “Re-Entry Court,” was spearheaded by two Orleans Parish Criminal District Court Judges, Arthur Hunter and Laurie White, with the help and support of Burl Cain. In the new program, lifers are given the chance to, “teach young convicts everything from welding to anger management to being a better father.”<sup>141</sup> The program

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<sup>139</sup> Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South 1866-1928*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 151.

<sup>140</sup> Burl Cain and Cathy Fontenot. "Managing Angola's Long-Term Inmates." *Corrections Today* 63, no. 5 (08, 2001), <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/215705201?accountid=10226>.

<sup>141</sup> Cindy Chang, “Re-entry Court Offers Opportunity for Young Convicts to Learn from Lifers,” *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA) July 25, 2011.

helps inmates feel some sort of purpose in their life, giving them a mentor position to someone younger who may have a chance at getting out of prison. Burl Cain does not have the power to free inmates from the prison, but he does have the power to give them hope and meaning, something which comes to fruition in this re-entry program. Instead of living out their days in a small cell, Cain gives these “lifers” a chance to be in charge of something. In an interview with the Times-Picayune New Orleans newspaper Cain sums this up, “It’s kind of like they can live their life through these guys they mentor and they train who are going back out, and their success in the community is also the success of the lifer here, and he takes ownership of them as if they are his children... Therefore he has a purpose in life, and hope. His life is not wasted in prison. He’s doing something good.”<sup>142</sup>

Because the majority of inmates at Angola are there for life, death is commonplace at the prison and burials are an unavoidable reality. Burl Cain describes the atrocious disrespect for human life and death he experienced when attending a burial at Angola in his first months as warden, “... a couple of grave diggers accompanied the cardboard casket to the newly dug grave. In the process of transporting it, the body fell out of the rain-soaked cardboard coffin, onto the ground...”<sup>143</sup> Today, caskets are carefully made out of solid wood,

Members of the deceased inmate’s church accompany one of the inmate pastors to the prison cemetery... The casket rests in a nineteenth-century replica hearse pulled by Percheron horses bred and cared for in another part of the prison. At the graveside, the pastor conducts a simple worship service as members of the prison commend his body to the earth...”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Chang.

<sup>143</sup> John Rottman, “Transform This: Could Revival Possibly Come Through the Prison System?” *Comment*, April 12, 2013, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/3962/transform-this/>.

<sup>144</sup> Rottman.

Burl Cain's institution of a new hospice program, comprised initially of 16 inmate leaders from various clubs and religious groups at Angola, has transformed the meaning of life and death within Angola. In Chapter One I describe the disposability of bodies during convict leasing, "The bodies that are buried in the levee rimming the prison farm remain unmarked and unacknowledged to this day." Today, thanks to Burl Cain's gospel, life is valued at Angola. In a documentary photography project done by photographer Lori Waselchuck images show the sensitive way in which those in hospice are cared for (Figure 3) and the fragile and important nature of an Angola funeral (Figures 4 and 5). Figure 3 denotes inmate Richard Liggett receiving tender care from numerous people. Images 4 and 5 follow the death of George Alexander, an inmate who died at age 53. His whole family was able to attend his memorial service inside of Angola's hospice chapel. Although initially disheartened to have the funeral within the prison, his daughter Angela Bradford had a change of heart saying, "We were torn up about having the burial inside Angola...but the beautiful funeral that they gave him was so much more than anything we could have done."



Figure 3. Hospice volunteers tend to inmate Richard Liggett.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup>Lori Waselchuk and Lawrence N. Powell, *Grace Before Dying*, (Brooklyn, New York: Umbrage Editions, 2011), 49.





Figure 4. Inmate George Alexander's body is carried to the site of his funeral.<sup>146</sup>

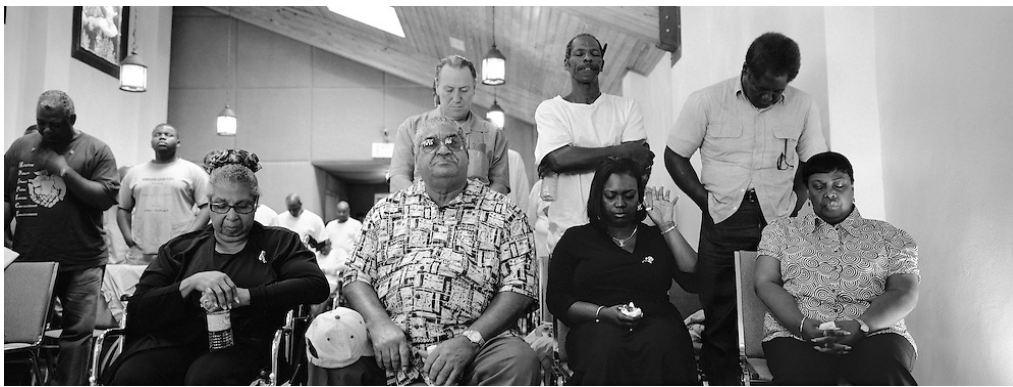


Figure 5. Family members of George Alexander attend his memorial service in one of Angola's many chapels.<sup>147</sup>

While much of America maintains that separation of church and state is vitally important to a democratic and functional society, a prison is very obviously an atypical part of American society. For better or for worse, prisons are a separate sphere from American society, playing by entirely different rules. When Burl Cain entered Angola prison in 1995 with few resources and many people to look after, he took what he knew to be a guiding force in his own life, his religion, and made it accessible to many. Perhaps a prison is one exceptional space where the overlap of church and state is not all bad. Because of religion, Burl Cain gave inmates a second

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<sup>146</sup> Waselchuk & Powell, 98-99.

<sup>147</sup> Waselchuk & Powell, 96-97.

chance. Because of religion, Burl Cain began the process of breaking abusive patterns of power within Angola. Because of religion, Burl Cain gave certain people something to live for when everything else had been taken away from them. Burl Cain had many lawsuits filed against him while acting as warden, from safety conditions of inmates to his personal wrongdoings with private inmate labor. These actions are inexcusable and wrong and no part of this paper argues in favor of this aspect of Cain's leadership. But Burl Cain did something within Angola that inarguably changed the lives of many inmates for the better: he listened and he believed. Because of religion, Cain treated inmates like human beings, and for this his leadership broke from the retribution of those before him, and created a new, forgiving, and radical approach to imprisonment at Angola, "People have changed their hearts here, and changed their lives... It's wrong to have a man who would never get another chance."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> *The Angolite*, September/October 2000, 35.

## CONCLUSION

The imposition by Burl Cain of a new and codified form of religion in Angola in 1995 was a bold and unpredictable move, one which could have gone in many directions. The Louisiana State Penitentiary, not to mention the greater United States, had faced centuries of harsh, draconian methods of punishment and who was to say religion was the cure for this unforgiving punishment? Burl Cain decided it was he, and just moments after his wardenship commenced he ushered in new religious programming such as the NOBTS Bible College. This thesis works to show that soon after the Bible College began and inmates began practicing religion and engaging in educational courses, these same inmates were acquiring leadership and mentorship positions within the prison and reflecting personal shifts within their own value systems as seen through poetry in *The Angolite*. Religion also shifted the previously strict and often violent power dynamics between prisoner and guard by allowing inmates to reform and then take on some of these roles themselves, creating a sense of trust between inmate and guard and inmate and inmate which rarely, if ever, existed within Angola before. Finally, religion was able to deal with and record death in a new, respectful, and civilizing way.

Much previous research on Burl Cain and religion within Angola also largely commend Burl Cain for the various ways in which the new Bible College broke barriers and emboldened or rehabilitated inmates. As an undergraduate college student I was not able to access every primary document I needed or spend years visiting Angola and getting to interview and understand the intricacies of the prison. These are shortcomings in my thesis that could not have been avoided. The information I gathered, although limited, does tell a picture of a dark place greatly transformed by the power of religion, building off of previous research by using photos, poetry,

and audio interviews; deeply personal evidence of change within inmates. A further study of even just *Angolite* poetry may shed more light on the effects of religion on inmates.

Almost all aspects of society demonize you once convicted in America; denial of public housing, voting privileges, one is often stereotyped and stifled at every turn. Convictions often signify, at very least, a social death, but a physical death is often inevitable as well. 31 states in America still practice the death penalty, Louisiana being one of these, and Angola being one of the places people are still executed today.<sup>149</sup> Instead of disposing of these people carelessly, Burl Cain found a way to bring their lives full circle by creating a hospice program and offering professional and strikingly beautiful memorial services for those who died while imprisoned at Angola. While just two hundred years' prior bodies were literally disposable at Angola, the lives under Burl's rule were equal, and their endings would be respected, regardless of the crime one may have committed. Burl's rule was radical—it not only broke with the traditional approach to imprisonment in Angola, but flipped it on its head.

Angola represents a microcosm of the wider criminal justice system in America, a system corrupted by those trying to profit off of the bodies who labor behind its walls and the capitalistic society perpetuating mass incarceration even by just the clothes we purchase and the shoes we wear. In a country where religion is tolerated but rarely promoted, especially in government matters, seeing it come face to face with one of the gravest sources of corruption in America, the prison, is significant. Although religion in Angola under Burl Cain is a success story in certain ways, Angola still is far from perfect, along with most, if not all, prisons across the United States. Although religion transformed Angola in radical ways, it is important to remember at the

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<sup>149</sup> “States With and Without the Death Penalty,” *Death Penalty Information Center*, November 9, 2016, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/states-and-without-death-penalty>.

end of the day that while these people are being rehabilitated or changed by religion, others are being targeted all over again in the same racist and classist ways. Until the criminal justice system is revolutionized from the ground up, religion, or any rehabilitative project, will only be able to give so much before the system takes it all away, like history has shown it always will.

## Figures

### Title Page

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