

BOOK REVIEWS

## Review of *No Godforsaken Place: Prison Chaplaincy, Karl Barth, and Practicing Life in Prison*

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### Military Chaplaincy Review

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*No Godforsaken Place: Prison Chaplaincy, Karl Barth, and Practicing Life in Prison*. By Sarah C. Jobe. New York: T&T Clark, 2025. 242 pages.

A careful reading of Holy Scripture reveals God's consistent care for the incarcerated. Consider Joseph in Genesis, or John the Baptist under Herod, or even Jesus himself, famously killed by state-sanctioned execution. Chaplains reflect this care while serving at the margins of society in the context of power. Exploring the role of prison chaplains can help military chaplains navigate power, especially as the military supports federal law enforcement at home and prepares for detainee missions in large-scale mobilization and combat operations.

With the above in mind, any chaplain can grow from reading Sarah C. Jobe's *No Godforsaken Place*. The subtitle, "Prison Chaplaincy, Karl Barth, and Practicing Life in Prison," presents a clear overview of her project. Karl Barth's Christocentric theological framework serves as her anchor as she explores how chaplains minister in prisons. Her work engages in life's foundational questions while keeping in mind the basic concern of who the chaplain is serving at any given moment.

Jobe's reliance on Barth delivers an unapologetically Christian perspective. Nineteen of the twenty chaplains she interviews are Christian. Motifs from incarnation to atonement, confession to resurrection, as well as the deep struggle with personal and systemic sin, provide the air from which the book breathes. She does write, however, mindful of interfaith prison ministry environments. Jobe draws on Barth to show how Jesus shares common humanity and circumstance with the incarcerated person. This is a very particular claim that comes from within the Christian tradition. At the same

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time, Jobe leaves room for any chaplain who feels a call to care for those behind bars to apply her observations to any context and perspective, thus allowing for the book to offer some utility for the non-Christian chaplain.

Jobe's project provokes the reader in uncomfortable ways that ring true in the military context. Harnessing Barth invites the connection, as his life traversed war and prison during twentieth-century Germany. Barth was thrice incarcerated. As a soldier he patrolled for escaped prisoners. Later he served as a prison chaplain despite his criminal record. Jobe appropriately highlights how this impacts Barth's understanding of who Jesus is. She uses Barth to notice how Jesus relates to those in prison while never forgetting he is the savior who sets prisoners free. This structure shapes how the chaplain represents Jesus to persons and how chaplains interact with the criminal justice system. Jobe's attention to this dynamic invites military chaplains reading her work to ponder how to serve "God and Country" amongst those who may not have any hope left beyond what the chaplain carries.

Jobe's work is not for casual readers. She employs Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and ethnographic methodological frameworks that demand careful attention. Yet, such technicalities shouldn't deter the curious. The true value of her work emerges when the reader stops to digest the many stories she shares. She discusses racial tension in the chapel,<sup>1</sup> trauma's effect on one's identity,<sup>2</sup> and how to deal with death of all kinds in the prison in "Interlude" and Chapter 5. These episodes, retold vividly from chaplain's own voices, invite the reader to deal with weighty questions, such as how a chaplain can advocate for the humanity of an inmate convicted of a heinous crime while simultaneously offering pastoral care to the correctional officers standing watch. Jobe's stories force us to confront the raw, unfiltered reality of ministry at the margins.

Many military chaplains will recognize the CPE methodology that Jobe employs in her narrative-led theological reflections. Some will appreciate this, while others may feel haunted by ghosts of verbatim past. CPE-trained chaplains serve in medical and incarceration settings because these settings resonate. Both environments hold people in specific and acute need with limited power to help themselves. Writing from her CPE and ethnographic training, which she covers significantly in the early portions of the book, Jobe maintains the grounding of Barth's theology and her theological premise of Jesus-as-incarcerated to keep the chaplain focused on the tension of Jesus-as-holy and Jesus-as-sin. When many on the outside of ministry will dehumanize or simply look away, the chaplain looks for Jesus, finding him in power and finding him in the wounds.

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1 Jobe, *No Godforsaken Places*, 80.

2 Jobe, *No Godforsaken Places*, 119.

In researching prison chaplains, Jobe examines the theological mystery of Jesus *being made sin*, along with us *being made sin-sick*. Sin-sickness manifests in those she studied as they suffered from “nightmares, heart palpitations, headaches, and insomnia” leading to therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) treatment, and body-based trauma release treatments. The “somatic empathy” of prison ministry,<sup>3</sup> in which the chaplain absorbs the emotions of the person before him or her, raises a substantial risk: secondary trauma felt as primary. This is where the military chaplain, potentially having absorbed both primary and secondary trauma along the way, might lean in and say “hey, that’s me!” I would offer that the reader must guard against receiving stress transference from *No Godforsaken Place*. Adding tertiary trauma to the mix poses a real threat when reading this book.

The exhaustive state of hyperarousal in prison ministry will remind many chaplains of time downrange, and the stress of serving as the only chaplain for a thousand or more in a prison will strike a chord with many battalion chaplains providing direct ministry *in extremis*. Stretched capacity accumulates spiritual blisters, and Jobe writes on the effect upon after-hours life for chaplains. Whether the demons seen in prison – or in battle for that matter – are literal or figurative, Jobe doesn’t say, though she does call it out as a “wicked problem.”<sup>4</sup> That she brings such narratives to light may help many chaplains heal while also demonstrating skills available to improve future ministry in any setting.

Reading Jobe’s work takes the reader behind bars, which can be costly even at a distance. Yet, Jobe’s focus on story and narrative, especially in an abject legal setting like incarceration, allows the human element to emerge. The chaplain carrying the humanizing burden in a sin-sick institution confronts these wicked problems but can also begin to heal them, running adjacent to rehabilitative justice. Readers notice how chaplains recognize the pain the offender causes but also that he has injured himself by his own crime. Sin hurts in both directions. Leading with story also allows the reader to come and go from reading based on one’s own comfort and capacity. The stories can be that evocative; the reader may need to allow multiple sittings or, in fact, many months to fully digest what Jobe spent over three years gathering.

Jobe’s project reminds us that chaplaincy is quite literally life and death work.<sup>5</sup> For instance, she examines chaplains’ care around execution and suicides and “58 carceral deaths” through the lens of Jesus’ own execution.

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3 Jobe, *No Godforsaken Places*, 132.

4 Jobe, *No Godforsaken Places*, 103 and elsewhere.

5 Jobe, *No Godforsaken Places*, 39.

Following the Christ that Jobe invokes, we enter into sin. We don't avoid it. We don't commit it or condone it. Rather, the chaplain enters into this darkness to carry light.

To think of Jesus primarily as an incarcerated person, while finding support in the biblical text and opening a path to compassionate ministry, still provides a profound theological prompt. How does loving a Christ who was bound, beaten, and held in a cell during an apparent miscarriage of justice help us care for anyone we minister to, regardless of circumstance or religious affiliation? For the military chaplain, this framing is essential. The concept of ministering to prisoners (or to soldiers) moves from a theoretical exercise to an immediate, Christological imperative. Jobe helps us to see that we serve no "mere prisoner." We seek the face of Christ in the one whom society has locked away. The chaplain may be the last person remaining on earth who cares for this person still carrying the image of God, wounded as that image may be. This spiritual grounding prevents the chaplain's work from drifting into mere social work or administrative process.

As seen above, the book's concepts transfer easily to the military chaplain's context, especially as we consider who we serve at any given moment. It seems like the military chaplain serves two masters, but we can also think that one Master (Jesus, for me and many others) calls us to serve in a particular setting with its own systems. Prison chaplains must also consider systems and masters. They might ask: Am I more interested, at any given moment, in the warden's priorities, or caring for the guards, or for the staff? How does one advocate for the inmates without excusing or condoning the crimes that put them in this situation? Military chaplains might think in terms of balancing soldiers' needs and interests against mission accomplishment. How do chaplains advocate for soldiers when the commander is their senior rater? What about when the system seems intractably unfair? Jobe's work offers portability-of-concept for the military chaplain who must walk this ethical tightrope as we recognize the human dignity of all, from friendly to enemy and all in between.

Besides considering one's affinity (or not) for CPE, many readers will note that Jobe's ethnographic focus and direct discussion of race and gender land differently after President Trump's termination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs within the federal government. Discerning chaplains know that recent policy changes don't remove our imperative to care for various people and communities in our midst. How we do that in any particular policy environment is an open question that Jobe's book doesn't directly address. Chaplains in prisons or on the battlefield know that gospel work is still necessary wherever sin clearly abounds. Her presentation helps provide frameworks to engage what we know are complicated questions at best. We would be naïve to think that DEI policy changes remove racial, sex, and other various tensions in our ranks, and doubly naïve to think the

same within carceral contexts in the United States. Jobe leaves finishing that prompt for the reader to resolve. Like most of her work, Jobe enters into the messy and uncomfortable places and carries gospel questions. She doesn't always provide the answers, letting the story ring in the ear.

Additionally, Jobe writes from research gathered during a relatively short era, so the frequent references to the COVID-19 pandemic leave the work feeling suddenly dated for a late 2025 release. The landscape of ministry has changed since the height of the pandemic, yet the questions of religious accommodation and human dignity persist. A generous reader must look past the specific contexts to receive the underlying points any story carries.

Ultimately, *No Godforsaken Place* offers a vital resource for military chaplains. From the chaplain serving in U.S. Army Corrections Command to the unit chaplain preparing for a detainee mission, this book will stretch and test one's assumptions. Really, any chaplain in any context can adapt Jobe's observations to sharpen ministry skills. Jobe's project applies readily to a civilian pastor supporting a local prison ministry as well as to a military chaplain advising a commander on the religious and moral aspects of an operation. The comfort of knowing that Jesus was on the other side of the bars encourages us to seek and find Jesus wherever he calls us to go. For military chaplains, we need this kind of challenge like we need a 12-mile foot march to test our endurance and resolve. *No Godforsaken Place* provides that march. I recommend this book for any religious leader seeking to grow as a theologian, a more compassionate caregiver, and a more faithful servant of God in the complex and otherwise hopeless mission fields that call us.

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