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## “Have a Little Faith”

*Religious Vision in Fox's Prison Break*

MARCIA ALESAN DAWKINS

*Through acts of faith, they toppled kingdoms,  
made justice work, and turned disadvantage to advantage, won battles.  
There were those who, under torture, refused to give in . . . [making] their  
lives of faith not complete apart from ours.<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

Regardless of whether the walls are visible, everyone is enclosed in a prison. Or so it would seem, judging from the religious visions presented in Fox Television's highly-rated and globally distributed television drama *Prison Break*.<sup>2</sup> At first glance, the series is an updated combination of themes from *Oz*, *The Great Escape*, *The Fugitive*, and *American Idol*.<sup>3</sup> Anchored by a story of brotherly love, *Prison Break* tells the tale of Michael Scofield, an engineer with first-hand access to the structural design of the penitentiary where his elder brother, Lincoln Burrows, is consigned after he is wrongly convicted of the murder of the vice president's brother. After he has exhausted all legal measures to try to secure Lincoln's freedom, Michael installs himself in the prison in order to mastermind and execute the ultimate escape. But a second look at

the broader themes in the series reveals something more—that society itself is a set of walls behind walls and that freedom is either one of two things: an illusion or a matter of having some faith. In this chapter, I will look at *Prison Break* in order to figure out the difference between these two possibilities.

Based on the premise of *The Great Escape* and calling to mind the setting of *Oz*, *Prison Break* goes beyond quasi-realistic portrayals of either incarceration or freedom by focusing on both in a way that emphasizes fantasy and faith. At the same time, the series' ensemble cast evokes the survival motif of *The Fugitive* and ethics of risk, calamity, and victory inherent in *American Idol*. These thematic qualities make *Prison Break* a ripe candidate for fantasy theme analysis, which will be used to uncover how themes such as faith, hope, grace, guilt, salvation, loyalty, safety, and redemption are encoded, imprinted, and translated into the religious visions that shape the characters' lives.

#### Method: Fantasy Theme Analysis

The theoretical perspective grounding fantasy theme analysis is Ernest Bornmann's *Symbolic Convergence Theory*, which describes the ways in which people learn to transcend mundane events and affairs in order to generate meaning for themselves and their communities. Informed by this theory, fantasy theme analysis is a tool for evaluating communication messages or concepts rather than the speakers, characters, audiences, or historical-cultural scenes implicated in a text.

It is important to note several assumptions that underlie this analytical perspective. First, a fantasy theme perspective suggests that "through conversations, speeches and messages, people build a shared view of reality that, while not necessarily objective, is created symbolically."<sup>14</sup> It is presumed that an individual shares his or her fantasy or "story about people, real or fictitious, in a dramatic situation, in a setting other than the here-and-now communication of the group."<sup>15</sup> This disclosure serves as a catalyst for others to tell their stories until the group arrives at a shared meaning and communicates its worldview.

Second, once a group arrives at a common worldview, it is best communicated and understood "through a rhetorical con-

cept called a fantasy theme.<sup>16</sup> The fantasy theme uses symbolism to shape individual experiences and, ultimately, to create a shared dream that becomes reality. In general, fantasy themes are expressed as short catchphrases called "symbolic cues" (e.g., "have a little faith" or "I pledge allegiance to the flag"). Consequently, interpretations, emotions, and motives for action are located in this message, providing a link between each character's fantasy themes and visions and his or her behavior.

Third, as characters share and extend fantasy explanations for the situations they encounter, they construct explanations of reality replete with "heroes, villains, plotlines, scenic description and sanctioning agents" for preserving the vision.<sup>17</sup> These explanations "chain out" within small groups and, "in turn, spread out across larger publics, serve to sustain the members' sense of community, to impel them strongly to action (which raises the question of motivation), and to provide them with a [populated] social reality."<sup>18</sup> Fantasy themes construct complex dramas that captivate and convert the multitudes in a symbolic reality. These dramas are rhetorical visions that create community, solidarity, and induce action.

Of course, it should also be noted that rhetorical visions compete with fantasy themes. Those who espouse divergent worldviews will react to the same situations differently, accepting information that is consistent with their theme and disregarding or devalorizing other information. For example, in *Prison Break*, the characters encounter opposing assertions about the inmates' guilt and innocence and of the role of the U.S. government and its representatives as protectors or oppressors. These fantasy themes connect to the larger visions of Christian faith and American civil religion that are dramatized when characters emphasize "social, pragmatic and righteous" descriptions of their realities.<sup>19</sup>

Critical elements in any fantasy theme or rhetorical vision include *dramatis personae*, storyline, sanctioning agent, and master analogue. *Dramatis personae* are "the characters depicted in messages that give life to a rhetorical vision."<sup>20</sup> A storyline, or plotline, consists of the historical-cultural setting and action. A sanctioning agent is a spokesperson who authorizes the vision. A sanctioning agent often takes the form of a higher power (e.g., God; a well-constructed and reasonable plan) or a political-moral framework

(e.g., the U.S. Constitution). Master analogues may be righteous (justice/injustice and hierarchy), social (human relationships), or pragmatic (results, acumen, and practicality). Together, these elements unveil fantasy themes or rhetorical visions, providing a space in which ethical issues and questions of ultimate meaning are played out.

The search for religious rhetorical visions and fantasy themes in *Prison Break* leads to the pair of critical questions that will be addressed in the section that follows: How is faith defined and presented both spiritually and civilly within the context of *Prison Break*? How do these presentations construct fantasy themes that unfold in the plot, setting, and religious visions for the characters' lives?

#### Visions of Faith in *Prison Break* Religious and Civil Perspectives

Faith, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews attributed to Paul, is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."<sup>11</sup> Christian history explains that this principle was revealed to Saint Paul while he was incarcerated, which means that Paul's words are part of the great stream of prison literature. This principle of faith, born under conditions of profound un-freedom, consists of four main components—knowledge, belief, confidence, and dependence—which testify to the idea that what we see is created by what we do not see.<sup>12</sup> It is, therefore, the cornerstone of the Christian religious vision:

In making the unfamiliar appear in the familiar, in making it accessible as what is inaccessible, religion formulates and practices the worldly situation of a social system that knows itself to be surrounded by the unknown in space and time.<sup>13</sup>

That being the case, religion can be defined as more than "words about God."<sup>14</sup> More than this, it can be defined as "words about God that are dramatized in array of symbolic forms, beliefs, and social behaviors that tell the story of the human condition across various historical, cultural, and geographical settings. Religious visions, therefore, become the medium of faith itself by question-

ing the very definition of freedom and confinement, hinting that even if our bodies are free, our minds and souls may not necessarily escape confinement.

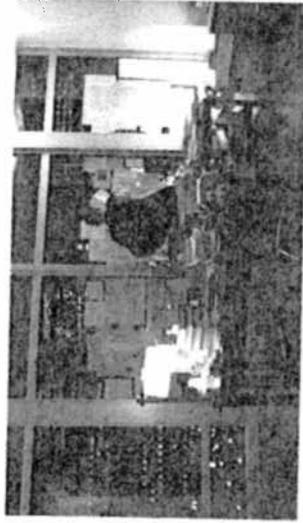
Outside the prison walls, Saint Paul warns us, invisible prisons exist. These take many forms: doubt, secrecy, selfishness, self-loathing, ethical and religious standards, legal controls, government and corporate greed, as well as the unwritten rules of racism, sexism, and classism as well as homophobia, addiction, and prejudice against the physically or mentally disabled. Since we may not be able to see these prisons without a religious vision—Christian or otherwise—it can be argued that we may not be able to escape them; we will remain prisoners of our intolerances and limited perceptions. The fantasy themes in *Prison Break* constitute a faithful attribution of these qualities of the human condition, suggesting that "the Lord appears" to rescue us from these prisons, provided we accept that we "are in need of forgiveness."<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand, this means that faith deals with reality—the way things actually are. This is reflected in Fox River Penitentiary, the setting of *Prison Break*'s first season. The setting is evidence of the unseen hierarchy of shame and blame that leads to imprisonment. This is because faith reminds us that we are imperfect, that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" and that this condition is hereditary and contagious.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, faith is expectant. It asks questions: Can we ever know "the truth of nature, the world, the universe, *reality*" or the reality of any human setting?<sup>17</sup> Is the reality in which we live the only one that exists? What I am getting at here is that faith confirms that things are not the way they ought to be and serves to motivate the prisoners' plans for escape. It defies the limitations of visible settings, troubling the ground on which reality apparently rests. Moreover, faith "comes by hearing" and must be present in order for the prisoner to envision his escape.<sup>18</sup> The reflexive relationship between faith and shared religious visions in *Prison Break* is profound—religious vision is the key to faith, which is the fantasy theme that builds new religious visions and allows characters to exercise a deeper and broader faith.

Brief descriptions of the intricate tattoo that covers half of Michael's body and the plot against Lincoln clarify this point. Michael's tattoo is the key element of the storyline; it is literally a

roadmap to freedom. The tattoo, which no one except Michael can decipher, contains blueprint plans for the prison, which he helped design. The tattoo makes Michael's plan both literal and metaphorical—a living symbol or text that evolves as his knowledge and character grow and transform.<sup>19</sup> Michael's master plan reflects a respect for discipline, detail, and perfection. It also accounts for every contingency except for free will. As such, Michael's tattoo/plan is a literal manifestation of his faith. Convinced that he can pull off the impossible, he has only to glance at the tattoo to artfully remind himself of his mission, no matter what his changing circumstances, interactions, and emotions bring.<sup>20</sup>



*Michael's faith.*

In many respects Michael, a nonreligious but ardently focused individual, is the only possible escape route for the motley crew of disciples he assembles. His twin identities as prisoner and savior support the Christian theme of faith, suggesting that a paradoxical freedom is earned in prison through self-sacrifice. This theme underscores the importance of faith in oneself, one's plan, the justice of one's cause, and in the redemptive power of faith to break through prison walls.

This reliance on faith is reflected in an exchange between Michael and his cellmate Sucre. Michael asks Sucre, "You believe in God don't you?"

"You know I do," Sucre replies.

"Then He'll protect you from him," retorts Michael.<sup>21</sup>

The "him" Michael refers to is an image of Satan, whose diabolical power is encoded in an inverted cross or "X" marking the spot where they drill into the wall. When another prisoner named

John sees the same image on the wall, he tells Sucre, "You should never underestimate a wall. Sometimes, no matter how much you try it just won't give in." The metaphor of the wall as enemy highlights the fact that one of the primary functions of a prison is to remove a person's ability to create fantasy themes of liberation that transcend space, time, and institutional authority.

Like the prison walls that receive so much attention from Michael and other inmates, the U.S. government's case against Lincoln Burrows contains many holes. This is confirmed by an expert witness who explains, "Maybe what we're looking for is what's not there. People who do this are ghosts . . . the guy behind the guy behind the guy. It's laced, ingrained. Eyes play tricks on you but cars don't lie."<sup>22</sup>

This element of the plotline also evokes an often unseen religious dimension in American public life: "While some have argued that Christianity is the national faith . . . few have realized that there actually exists alongside . . . the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America."<sup>23</sup> In fact, the very name "Lincoln" is suggestive of the American civil-religious vision and its fantasy theme of faith that suffuses the series.

Civil religion, like the traditional religions with which most audiences may be familiar, is about unification. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, this process involves both a merger and a partition, that is, who is American? What actions are fundamentally American? These questions can be answered by examining the beliefs, symbols, and rituals of a group. Described in terms of civil religion, Americans can be identified by their speech and symbols—reverence for the flag, the Constitution, the holiday calendar, the invocation of God in political speeches and public monuments; the veneration of past political leaders and military veterans; and founding myths and similar religious or semireligious practices. Americans can also be identified by the ideals they uphold—freedom, individualism, and self-reliance.

Bellah identifies the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement as three decisive historical events that have influenced the vision of civil religion in the United States. I would argue that the plot against Lincoln Burrows in *Prison Break* constitutes another, albeit fictional, event—involving a web of conspiracy that stretches from the prison to far corners of the

globe and involves familial responsibility, political power, and legislative corruption.

Since Lincoln is paying for the sins of others he, like President Lincoln, can be seen as a type of savior or martyr. In many respects Lincoln is the "sacred cow" of the narrative, one of the toughest and most destructive men in the prison population and, because of his innocence, a redeemable person. As such, he struggles to reconcile a sense of hope with a resignation to death. His unjust imprisonment suggests that he—a white male—is the primary victim of the series because he has been cast into a "debased" black and brown environment. In this way, his identity reflects Michael's: a heroic man of faith surrounded by those who lack faith.

The plot against Lincoln also reflects the labyrinthine structure of the prison tattooed on Michael's skin. These parallel worlds are reflected in the messages, attitudes, and actions of the protagonists and by the audiences who might identify with Lincoln and Michael as "normal" (i.e., white male) subjects, envisioning them as embodiments of their own perceived victimization.

Prisoners are identified by the particular behaviors that, we are told, justify their incarceration (i.e., lack of freedom).<sup>24</sup> In this sense, prisoner identity is itself a fantasy theme useful for the study of minority positions or discourses of otherness in U.S. culture. Thus prisoner identity illuminates cultural institutions such as the criminal justice system, politics, and the visual media wherein criminals are represented as "the other" in terms of race, sexuality, and moral standing (e.g., *Cops, Oz, Law and Order, America's Most Wanted*). These narratives often propagate stereotypic constructions of raced and gendered criminal identities. Aspects of *Prison Break's* fantasy themes occasionally counter such constructions by critiquing the racial, sexual, and class prejudices that dominate mainstream representations of prison culture.<sup>25</sup> In this manner the themes of faith in *Prison Break* engage popular culture and reshape the vision of prison life that underlies the audience's reactions to those who are incarcerated.

*Prison Break* accomplishes this social engagement and critique by showing how people on either side of the prison walls can coexist even if their lives are radically separate; they are only able to meet through the bars imposed on them by others and themselves.

This interpretation of imprisonment as a pervasive existential condition is represented symbolically by nearly every window or partition on the show, in which both interior and exterior spaces are often viewed from behind bars or other obstacles. This aesthetic strategy foregrounds the characters' frustrated dreams of escape to an "outside," which may not even exist. It also implies a moral separation as well. The tension created by this separation sets the stage for dramatic reversals of fortune, which allow the series to pose important and interesting questions pertaining to faith, civil religion, and the study of television drama in a post-9/11 context.

These questions include: How do Christianity and U.S. civil religious fantasy themes present religious visions as means of imprisonment and escape? How do religious visions cause crises of faith that lead characters to change direction? What happens when someone "lays down his life for his friend?"<sup>26</sup> How do religious visions and the plans they catalyze attract "the unconverted" who have not yet realized that escape is possible? In the discussion that follows, I will describe the competing worldviews that prompt these questions and examine the ways in which key characters grapple with them as they fantasize about making it to freedom. I then describe how the plotlines in the first two seasons of *Prison Break* conjoin Christian and civil-religious visions by showing that the world inside the prison walls is simply a condensed, stripped-down reflection of the "free" world on the other side of the bars.<sup>27</sup>

This argument is extended through analysis of the prisoners' exodus, highlighting the faithful ideals that relate to characters' moral values—guilt, redemption, grace, patriotism, freedom, and hope. I argue that *Prison Break's* ideological fixation on having "a little faith" emphasizes that confidence, intelligence, adaptability, and an ability to see beyond what is immediately visible accounts for the characters' ability to survive. I conclude by linking these fantasy themes with what I call the show's post-9/11 "perpetual prisoner perspective." This perspective suggests that the primary cultural tools for understanding events are not simply words, but interpretations of the powerful spiritual and civil-religious visions we remember, inherit, create, and encounter.

### Season 1: The Look and Language of Faith

Despite dropping crime rates in the United States, the number of people in American prisons has increased by more than 450 percent since 1980.<sup>28</sup> "In other words, one out of every 133 U.S. residents is behind bars."<sup>29</sup> Depending on one's perspective, this population explosion is the outcome of political, legal, social, and economic successes or failures. From the vantage point of popular culture, the prison population boom has become a site of both cultural invention and resistance, which is reflected in music, literature, styles of speech and dress, and in televised practices and descriptions of prison life.

An informal *Google* search yields thousands of titles based on this theme, ranging from Martin Luther King's *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* and Paul Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress to Oz, The Great Escape, The Shakeshank Redemption, Short Eyes, and American History X*. These mediated representations depict prison as a product of, and a metaphor for, the forces of exclusion at work in the various physical, social, and spiritual worlds that Americans inhabit. Once inside the walls, everyone is a prisoner. In *Prison Break*, even the corrections officers, who are perceived differently only because of the symbolic authority conveyed by the badges they wear, are held captive. This fragile social construction fore-shadows a reversal of roles and circumstances: Michael will assume the identity of a guard in order to secure the safest escape route, and corrections officers will eventually become inmates.

Although warden Henry Pope ("The Pope") is in charge, Michael is warned that prison is a world in which the Ten Commandments do not exist. Instead there are only two prison commandments: "You got nothin' comin'." The second one is see commandment number one.<sup>30</sup> The brutal realities of prison life such as rape, suicide, murder, jealousy, betrayal, and mutilation cause prisoners to undergo a personal process of breaking down and rebuilding. In this regard the relationships and rules that prisoners develop through personal encounters with (human or divine) others provide insight that influences future choices. This process is described by Michael's cellmate Sucre as a kind of initiation: "Welcome to Priscyeland."<sup>31</sup>

Religious fantasy themes are often juxtaposed with these "realistic" depictions of the prison setting as evidence that no human system or identity is inevitable, innate, or unchanging. For this reason, religious visions promise inclusion, acceptance, and escape in the spiritual world beyond the walls. The prisoner's ability to identify and cross over to this other world hinges on whether he "has a little faith."

As mentioned earlier, *Prison Break* can be seen as a series rife with faithful attributions, which apply definitions of faith to the setting, action, and characters' stories. Accordingly, the program represents the competing logics of faith articulated by both Saint Paul and Robert Bellah. *Prison Break* is set between a pair of conflicting worldviews that compete for control of the human soul—the physical world of the prison and the spiritual world of redemption, an earthly hell and heaven. In a superficial sense, prison is a model for all modern social organizations. It is an institution made up of many compartments whose borders are maintained by constant observation and identification. In other words, it should come as no surprise that this theme emerges in mass media entertainment. This is confirmed in *Prison Break* when inmates describe the jail as a map of the United States. The cell is "New York City," the "infirmary/escape hatch is California," and the underground pipes connecting the two are "Route 66, our ticket outta here."<sup>32</sup>

The allusion to escaping the United States and crossing the border into freedom is congruous with the observation of a real-life prisoner who wrote, "most Americans remain ignorant . . . that they live in a country that holds hostage behind bars another populous country of their fellow citizens."<sup>33</sup> The prisoners' invisibility and alienation from mainstream society are the markers of an underclass, a group from which audiences are willfully segregated in real life. This segregation accounts for representations of prison life as a minority position and a kind of afterlife in the series. Prison is the hellish place to which lost souls are banished as they serve time for their evil deeds, rarely to be seen or heard from again.

On a deeper level, however, the first season of *Prison Break* describes this hell in terms of faithful language and symbols—particularly beneath the shadow of the crucifix, signaling the powers

of redemption, sacrifice, pain, freedom, and light. The show begins during Lent, a time during which faithful Christians give up something they value for forty days in order to identify with Christ's experience in the wilderness. In this vein, Michael relinquishes his freedom in order to save his brother and finds true freedom in self-sacrifice. He enters the prison approximately forty days before Easter, and his plan to free Lincoln crystallizes at Easter, the most significant event in the Christian religious tradition. Not only is Easter a time of endings, it is also a time of new beginnings made available through salvation and redemption. Its foremost symbol is the cross, a facsimile of which is visible in virtually every scene of every episode.

As the most frequently displayed symbol of faith in the drama, the cross is found multiple times on Michael's tattoo, on Sucre's chain, in the chapel, on Bible covers and crucifixes and everywhere there are fences, bars, windows, shadows, and lights. It is even used as the symbol that pinpoints locations when the inmates are tracked by radar technology.

The brothers are reunited for the first time during the first season in the prison chapel under the cross, where the minister preaches that judgment day is coming. This Armageddon is both spiritual and physical, as a race riot in the prison pits Michael against both white and black inmates. While being courted by both sides Michael explains to his brother that his relationship with a black inmate, Benjamin Franklin (a.k.a., C-Note), "tran-



The brothers meet under the cross' shadow.

sends race." To which Lincoln replies, "nothing transcends race in here."<sup>31</sup>

Later, Brad Bellick, a hateful white prison guard, asks Michael which side he will choose. He replies "neither." This constitutes an ironic exegetic moment because the actor who plays Michael (Wentworth Miller) is multiracial. In keeping with the religious vision of faith, however, this exchange is reminiscent of the biblical encounter between Joshua and Michael the archangel:

Once when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?" He replied, "neither; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come."<sup>32</sup>

Michael Scofield is true to the character his name represents, as an interpreter of Christ's message, because he understands that he is waging a different kind of war: His war is for freedom from, rather than for control of, the prison. Like the battle of Jericho, this battle will end when the walls come tumbling down.

In order to win this war, Michael will enlist the services of a select yet diverse group of inmates and civilians who, in many respects, can be considered his twelve disciples. In addition to his brother, he recruits his cellmate Sucre, bank robber D. B. Cooper, and mob boss John Abruzzi. As the escape plan proceeds, it is discovered by T-Bag, C-Note, Tweener, Haywire, and Sucre's cousin Manche. The final main players are two women: Michael's wife Nika—a Czechoslovakian exotic dancer who marries him for citizenship in exchange for her participation in the plan—and Michael's doctor at the prison, Sara Tancredi, who is the governor's daughter, a recovering heroin addict, and his eventual love interest. These women are allusions to women of faith—Mary Magdalene and Abraham's wife Sara.

Each of these characters is confronted with past transgressions and crises of faith that have polluted their lives and landed them in prison. Their struggles for redemption and atonement fall in line with the fantasy theme of guilt-redemption inherent in the religious vision. Within this vision, each person's level of guilt corresponds to the level of spiritual pollution he or she

experiences. When this pollution reaches a critical mass, the individual is plagued by guilt. Guilt plays out in one of two ways: "victimage"—assigning guilt to the other—or "mortification," in which case the person assigns guilt to himself or herself.<sup>56</sup> This culture of blame harkens back to the idea of "original sin."<sup>57</sup>

Blaming the other is the psychological mechanism that keeps prisoners from paradise and encloses them in prisons. As a consequence, no one can be set free without taking responsibility for his or her transgressions. The guilt-redemption theme in *Prison Break* requires characters either to prove that blame truly belongs to another party or to take responsibility for their actions, confess, do penance, and seek absolution. As we see in this season, absolution is found through self-sacrifice, enduring scapegoating, or undergoing conversion, and accepting grace through faith.

Lincoln's freedom is the vehicle for his redemption, as well as Michael's, because Lincoln is the primary scapegoat. According to the religious fantasy theme, Lincoln must be freed because he is serving time for a crime he did not commit. And since Lincoln's degree of guilt is in no way commensurate with his punishment, he is part of a hierarchy of victimage in which he is forced to pay for the crimes of others.

Juxtaposed with this Christian theme are the American civil religion fantasy themes of nationalism and universality, which take shape in individual lives as the virtues of unswerving loyalty and deep patriotism. In these terms, it can be argued that Lincoln has been "kept on reserve for [a] state occasion when some ritual sacrifice was deemed necessary."<sup>58</sup> The events that unfold in the first season reveal that sacrifice is necessary because Vice President Caroline Reynolds is running for the presidency in an upcoming election. Reynolds' brother, corporate executive Terrence Stedman, had committed multiple Enron-style crimes for which he was about to be arrested, which meant that for his sister to ascend, he had to be "eliminated."

Though Stedman is not dead, Lincoln was framed for killing him through an elaborate web of false testimony engineered by "the Company." As a consequence, Caroline Reynolds' allegiance is to this group of powerful and unseen corporate gods, which communicates with her through an intermediary who shows her little respect. Though individuals employed by various divisions of the

government describe themselves as public servants, it becomes clear that each person who is affiliated with the state is a predator, intent only on ensuring his or her own survival without regard to the welfare of anyone else.

Within this corrupt political hierarchy, justice is perverted in order to frame Lincoln and cover up underlying social, economic, political, and familial arrangements that support the dysfunctional system. "Looking back on it," Lincoln says to Michael, "I was set up. And whoever it was that set me up wants me in the ground as quickly as possible."<sup>59</sup>

Lincoln is correct, but what he does not know is the real target of the Company's machinations was Aldo, the father of Lincoln and Michael, a former Company agent who threatened to expose the widespread corruption in which his former employers were involved. This is why Aldo appears whenever an attempt is made on Lincoln's life. "We have a cause," Aldo informs Lincoln, "wars averted, millions of lives saved."

"And you were willing to sacrifice me, your son?" asks Lincoln, invoking the biblical story of Abraham, who is willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac, when God commands it.<sup>60</sup> Like Abraham, Aldo is granted a reprieve when he passes this test of loyalty to his higher ideals, and events unfold that allow Aldo to take his son's place in the witness stand, thereby sparing Lincoln, for a time, from the Company's wrath.

Michael, Lincoln's brother, knows none of this; in fact, it was he who was sacrificed by Aldo. Michael was abused and later abandoned by his father—a form of trauma that figures into the histories of many of his fellow inmates, especially T-Bag.<sup>61</sup> As a consequence of this experience and because of his belief in the fantasy themes of guilt, self-sacrifice, and redemption, Michael has a little sense of self-worth and feels that he deserves to be in the hell of prison. But instead of perpetuating the cycle of violence, Michael resolves to become a rescuer rather than an abuser, acting on his belief that he caused his brother's suffering because his education and opportunities were financed by Lincoln's shady business activities. This vision, coupled with his fear of abandonment, is the primary motivator for his actions.

As the storyline unfolds, the brothers' worldviews begin to converge. They realize that their family's yearning for freedom



and justice is intertwined with the yearnings of all the other prisoners. As they discover and begin to expose the widespread injustice perpetrated by the Company, the righteousness of their newfound cause soon looms larger than the original goal of exonerating Lincoln.

In this way, the fantasy themes of Pauline faith and American civil religion merge into a larger religious vision, one that incorporates an understanding of distinctly American ways of life with a biblical understanding of liberation through faith. This vision "is a project of common moral purpose, one which places upon citizens a responsibility for the welfare of their fellows and for the common good."<sup>12</sup> In the end, shared suffering becomes a call to arms, a perspective consistent with both the Judeo-Christian vision of redeemed believers as God's coworkers in the creation of a more just society and the civil-religious vision of Americans as "an almost chosen people" whose light illuminates that world.<sup>13</sup>

In order to expose injustices and create a better society, Michael and Lincoln must escape. Each of the other inmates has his own particular motives for escape—love, family, revenge, greed, or a desire to be reborn. But to breach the walls that hold them captive, they must put aside their differences and disagreements and act as one body. Their collective situation is, as John tells Michael, no longer "a me versus you thing—it is an us thing."<sup>14</sup> In each subsequent episode, the prison environment tests their devotion with its scientific and technological controls. As C-Note informs Michael, only the fittest survive because "Darwin wins inside prison. Not Einstein."<sup>15</sup> In other words, competition and empirical knowledge, not imagination, ensure survival within prison walls.

This social Darwinist theme recurs throughout the series; indeed, C-Note's comment illustrates the fact that few texts other than the Bible have a greater influence on human relations than Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. And C-Note's utterance of the symbolic cue "survival of the fittest" is also important. First, it "espouses a physicalist view of reality, according to which everything that exists is either physical or else it depends necessarily on the physical for its emergence and continued existence."<sup>16</sup> This theme is consistent within a prison context insofar as it draws our attentions to the fact that there is little that prisoners can see beyond the prison walls. Second, this theme erases the dis-

functions—most notably the capacity for transcendence—between humans and animals.

"Survival of the fittest" not only invites a comparison between prisoners and animals but also between superior and inferior types of human beings; efforts to justify prejudices such as racism, sexism, and homophobia are examples of this impulse. For this reason, it is important and troubling to note that the Darwinian symbolic cue is articulated by an African American man whom a racist might see as more naturally adapted for the prison environment than Michael and other white inmates.<sup>17</sup>

C-Note's cue also assumes an ideological argument for a world in which God does not exist. Insofar as a social Darwinist fantasy theme can be applied to human relations outside of prison (as it was by Marx), it allows for the existence of no being with greater authority than the state.<sup>18</sup> So, while this theme does account for the struggles inherent in human existence and the apparent progress in human development, it does so by privileging the epistemological vision of science over the unpredictability of faith and imagination.

The virtues associated with this perspective are independence, strength, and contempt for vulnerability. These are illustrated by the technological ability to organize and communicate knowledge, which creates power for the public servants—the presidential administration, the Secret Service, and the prison officers whose livelihoods depend on the effectiveness of the prison as a container for disruptive influence—intent on preventing the prisoners' escape. As the story reaches its climax in the first season, the energy devoted to preserving and amplifying power seems to transform all of society into prison under constant surveillance.<sup>19</sup> In the words of David Hale, a Secret Service agent attempting to murder Lincoln's son, "I swear to God, it just gets deeper and deeper."<sup>20</sup>

"I swear to God" is another symbolic cue that is important to the religious vision of *Prison Break*. This oath, also taken by Reynolds when she becomes president, suggests that God is a higher moral, social, and/or political authority than humanity or any human organization. It also indicates that someone or something exists beyond what is visible. Thus, for everyone who is somehow imprisoned—but especially for the prisoners at the center of the story in *Prison Break*—faith is the answer.

Their faith is based on knowledge (allowing them to evade the authority of the state), adaptability (to do what is unexpected in the eyes of those around them), and an ability to see beyond what is immediately visible (which affords them a kind of insight into the world beyond the prison walls and the nations beyond the United States). These gifts of faith enable the prisoners to see the light and break out.<sup>31</sup> Though every day appears to be a lost cause, they fight and persevere because of the faith that strengthens their resolve. They know that they will escape even though they often do not know how they will do it. This fantasy theme is the inspiration for several of the visions dramatized by the escaping prisoners.

For instance, in an episode titled "Sleight of Hand," John has a revelation. He sees his first religious vision in the rust stains on the wall in his cell. He sees the face of Christ on the cross because he is plagued by guilt over murdering T-Bag's four-year-old nephew. According to John's ethical code, killing a child is unforgivable. It is for this reason that he is plagued by nightmares in which the child rises from the dead to haunt him under a crucifix. These dreams lead him to the conclusion that Christ appeared to him because he is in need of forgiveness.

He seeks counsel from the reverend. "Behold," reads the reverend, "I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him and he with me."<sup>32</sup> John has heard the Lord's voice and accepts him as Savior because he wants to be a better man. When John extends the same choice to T-Bag, asking him to redeem himself for his offenses by backing out of the escape plan, he is violently rejected. T-Bag slashes John's throat, intending to kill him but ultimately providing the means for John to be born again.

When John returns to the prison several episodes later, he and Michael have a conversation that explains his transformation. While clutching his cross, John says that "the old sinner was confined to these walls. He's dead. The new soul deserves to be free." Michael, in a skeptical tone, replies, "The old sinner was going to have a jet ready for us." John replies, "Noah had his ark. Did he not? Let us pray."<sup>33</sup> John's evil actions outside the prison reveal that the old sinner was hard to kill; not surprisingly, his feuds with T-Bag and other foes resume. His inauthentic faith is respon-

sible for his eventual demise, confirming the biblical principle that "the very moment you separate . . . faith and works . . . you get . . . a corpse."<sup>34</sup>

Religious visions also inform the episode titled "End of the Tunnel," when the prisoners decide to attempt escape even though Michael tells them that "the way is not finished" and Lincoln is trapped in solitary confinement awaiting the electric chair. In order to secure Lincoln's release, Michael "puts it in God's hands."<sup>35</sup> In an act that brings to mind a key line from the Eucharist ("This is my body—take, eat"), Michael slices open the cross on his tattoo with a razor blade, extracts a pill intended for Lincoln from deep within his flesh, and hides it in Sucre's crucifix. He then asks for the reverend and prays Psalm 23, emphasizing the fourth verse: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."<sup>36</sup>

After their shared devotional, the reverend assures Michael, "He does hear our prayers." The reverend continues to comfort Michael by agreeing to take the crucifix to Lincoln and by reinforcing the religious vision at play in the scene, telling him, "If [Lincoln] accepts the Lord, he'll be free forever. This cage can't bind him."<sup>37</sup> In other words, by swallowing the pill, Lincoln ingests Michael's blood and body, accepting them as sacrifices for his freedom.

The pill makes Lincoln ill and he is transferred to the infirmary, where Michael and the other inmates plan to meet him and escape. The escape is thwarted when they discover that the hole that Michael created to get to the infirmary has been filled. Michael chooses to view this obstacle as a temporary setback, reminding those around him, "Preparation can only take you so far. After that you have to take some leaps of faith."<sup>38</sup>

In keeping with a religious vision centered on the idea that God fathers us toward spiritual maturity, Michael remains the leader of his team but begins to trust them to make and execute decisions on their own for the common good. As Michael shows faith in his fellow prisoners, they rise to the challenge, working together to keep the plan in motion. Instead of being helplessly dependent upon Michael, they grow in wisdom as their faith in the possibility of freedom deepens. For example, Sucre, Manche, and

Lincoln devise a plan to get Michael out of solitary confinement; Michael pushes Haywire to remember and draw a piece of his tattoo (an image that Michael calls "a pathway to heaven") after it has been burned away; Sara plays a "key" role when she leaves the door to the infirmary unlocked so that Michael can escape; Cooper, C-Note, and T-Bag work together to bribe a corrections officer; Nika helps Michael win Sara's affections; and Abruuzzi arranges their transportation.

The escape plan begins to unravel when Tweener betrays Michael by revealing the plan to a crooked corrections officer. As a consequence of this betrayal, the prisoners are forced to leave three days ahead of schedule, and Michael attacks the Pope in order to ensure Lincoln's escape. The downward spiral continues as soon as the escapees are over the wall, when they begin to turn on one another. The rules of the invisible prison in each of their hearts are more subtle and deadly than those of the visible prison they left behind.

### Season 2: Ideals of Faith

While there is no doubt that "The Fox River Eight" taste a bit of the freedom they long for after they scale the walls of the penitentiary, their escape presents a paradox. It seems that they escape a visible cage only to be trapped in invisible ones—the collective social prison of the United States and the individual prisons of their pasts. The change of venue in the second season of *Prison Break* allows for the development of a fantasy theme of freedom as a goal that the escapees must continue to pursue. What they fail to account for initially is that lives on the run are hardly different from lives in the penitentiary. "For in freeing oneself *perpetually*, one would in a sense remain perpetually a prisoner, since one would never have perpetually escaped."<sup>60</sup> Lincoln describes his experience of his status as a perpetual prisoner with the lamentation, "This is never gonna stop. They're gonna keep coming after us."<sup>61</sup> As each prisoner progresses toward the realization of his vision, he remains faithful to a plan and seeks the redemptive power symbolized by the cross. And despite the fact that trust is in short supply for people whose lives have been shaped by betrayal, the escapees learn that faith in a vision leads to faith in others.

The defining vision of faith in this season is consistent with, and more complex than, the vision of season 1, proving that "there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity."<sup>62</sup> Season 2 continues to elaborate on themes that equate suffering with redemption and that present a choice to surrender confidence in visible reality in order to place trust in the unseen other who points toward an unknown future path. But the vision of season 2 is distinct because it is now framed as a manhunt that requires the Company to search for the escapees and vice versa—a metaphor for the search for the body of Christ after his escape/resurrection.

The central characters must keep running forward in faith even as everything around them is reversed—identity, position, time, direction, belief, and fortune. Unable to completely trust themselves, one another, their enemies, or the evidence they unearth, they begin to see the invisible prisons in which they are enclosed and look to God for answers. "No character is sacred" or safe.<sup>63</sup> More to the point, each character undergoes his or her own redemption in order to reverse the process by which he or she became a prisoner. Their journeys end when they recognize and accept that they are redeemed and that, for that reason, they no longer need to run.

In this sense, the second season trades on the Christian notion that freedom begins at the moment when sinners are pardoned because they accept grace.<sup>64</sup> Like the Israelites in the Old Testament and Americans as they are configured in the Puritan myth of a chosen people, the escapees do not immediately find themselves in the promised land. Now that they are on the outside, the focus shifts from the construction and execution of Michael's escape plan to how the company can protect itself from exposure and defeat. Thus, before escaping the social prison of the United States, the protagonists have to confront the powers that be, decode and dismantle the plots against their families, grapple with their consciences, and endure an extended period of wandering in hostile territory.

In the spiritual world, the focus shifts from the characters' learning to place faith in fellow travelers to their learning to trust the other who cannot be seen. In the remainder of this section, I will concentrate on the faithful ideals associated with Michael, Sara, and Secret Service/Company agent Paul Kellerman to

illustrate how *Prison Break's* primary religious imperative—"have a little faith"—plays out against the ever-changing landscape of the social and political prison into which the characters have escaped.

In an episode titled "Bolshoi Booze," Michael cracks under the pressure of his inner turmoil. He begins to doubt his cause and question who he has become. After stealing a GPS system from a kind elderly storekeeper, he sinks into a depression and mulls over the pain he has inflicted on others in pursuit of his goal. Then, suddenly, he falls to his knees and turns his eyes to an image of the cross. He is riveted by it, though he has encountered and ignored the same image over the course of the day—indeed, throughout his life. But this cross catches his eye and sparks an out-of-body experience. There is nothing in the cross itself that makes it look different from any of the other crosses he has seen; it is simply that now he is seeing the image through the eyes of faith.

This experience allows Michael to feel God's presence, and the promised land seems within his grasp. But Michael is also suddenly aware of his impending judgment day. This unsettles him to the point that he enters a church to speak his truth and search for answers. His doubt and pain are the consequences of his seeing the suffering he has caused through the eyes of his victims. His symbolic convergence with their perspectives causes him to confess.

MICHAEL: Bless me father, for I have sinned.

PRIEST: How long has it been since your last confession?

MICHAEL: This is my first time, in a long time.

PRIEST: And what is the nature of your sins?



Michael's tearful confession.

MICHAEL: The nature? I'm not really sure.

PRIEST: Deep down inside your heart you know.

MICHAEL: Righteousness, maybe? Believing the ends justify the means?

PRIEST: And what are those ends?

MICHAEL: Saving someone's life.

PRIEST: And the means?

MICHAEL: I've broken just about every law you can name.

But it's not just what I've done. It's what others have done. Because I let them. Because I was doing what I thought was right. I should've known better this time.

PRIEST: This time?

MICHAEL: When I was a kid, I watched a man bleed out and die. But I was glad. Because he deserved it.

PRIEST: Life is only for God to give and take, my son.

MICHAEL: Suddenly, there was this dark space inside of me. And I knew it was wrong. But here I am.

MICHAEL: There is a way to stop this. Surrender your will to God.

MICHAEL: If I surrender now, I'll lose everything I love.

PRIEST: But do you lose your soul in the process?

MICHAEL: Well, we all have our crosses to bear.

This exchange is the most direct expression of *Prison Break's* religious vision in that it reveals the prisoner's intense desire to be free (in this case free of sin), the means that allow him to achieve this freedom, and his own definition of the concept. It also reveals that Michael fails to see his most egregious offense: the refusal to forgive. If he continues to believe that he can atone for his sins by his own efforts, he does not accept the grace that comes through faith (in other words, through the sinner's surrendering his will to God).

Michael finds himself at a crossroads, grappling with the age-old religious question posed by Jesus himself:

If anyone wants to be My follower, he must forget about himself. He must take up his cross and follow Me. If anyone wants to keep his life safe, he will lose it. If anyone gives up

his life because of Me, he will save it. For what does a man have if he gets all the world and loses his own soul? What can a man give to buy back his soul?<sup>601</sup>

Michael is divided—trying to work out whether the will of God is a power that can carry him or a burden that he must forever carry. Because of the tension between his low self-esteem and steely resolve, Michael feels that the answer to all his problems is further self-recrimination. He manages to move beyond this impasse to see that there is no other righteousness except the righteousness that comes by grace through faith. The priest reminds Michael that if he is righteous at all it is only because he places his trust in God.

After his confession, Michael is reunited with Suere, Lincoln, and Aldo, who tell him everything they have discovered. Namely, that Lincoln and Michael have been crucified and can be resurrected by the media and that Aldo did not abuse Michael but saved Michael from abuse and killed his abuser. Aldo goes on to explain that because the sins of the father are visited upon his children, he has returned to set things right. Michael accepts this information and incorporates it into his worldview, and Aldo and Michael are able to make peace with the past and forgive one another an instant before the Company arrives. Aldo is shot while protecting Michael and Lincoln as they make yet another dramatic escape. He dies in Michael's arms, and Michael realizes that he is loved because his father sacrificed himself for his children.

This experience reinforces the Christian fantasy theme of God as a father who protects his children regardless of whether they acknowledge him or not and who knows what they need and has plans for their lives. This vision of a Father/God sustains the brothers, and they are able to move forward after they bury Aldo and mark his grave with a cross. Aldo's death restores Michael's faith because he now has a direct and personal relationship with his father. That relationship revealed his father's true identity and gave Michael a genealogy and a purpose. As his faith grows, his hope stirs and his vision clears. He rises up, armed with "the shield of faith," and is ready to stand and fight, proclaiming, "Liberty to the [physical and spiritual] captives and the opening of the prison and of the eyes to those who are bound."<sup>602</sup>

Michael and Lincoln's tenacity offers the possibility of redemption to Secret Service agent Paul Kellerman when he begins to doubt the civil-religious vision to which he has devoted his life for the past fifteen years. He especially questions his service to Vice President Reynolds (who is now president because Paul murdered the sitting president), her family, and the United States. He engaged in murder, torture, kidnapping, bearing false witness, and other forms of deceit to sustain this vision.

The offense he most regrets is posing as a gay addict to earn and then betray Sara's trust. In what he believes is the interest of national security, Paul insinuates himself into Sara's life in the hope that she will lead him to Michael. When she is of no further use to him, he is instructed to kill her, and for the first time he does not want to kill. He is moved by Sara's devotion to Michael, despite the fact that her loyalty has cost her everything. He pleads with Sara to surrender the information he seeks, telling her, "Don't make me do this." She responds by telling him to "go to hell."<sup>603</sup>

And that is exactly what happens. After Sara escapes his custody for the second time, Paul is "terminated" by the Company. The scales fall from his eyes, and he realizes that he has pledged his life to people who do not care about him or the values they profess. The man that was Agent Kellerman no longer exists. Wracked with guilt, he finds himself with no one to turn to but God, and he begins his own redemptive process by helping Michael, Lincoln, and Sara with theirs.

It is for this reason that Paul first comes to Michael and Lincoln's aid. When the brothers are captured and transported from a local prison to a state penitentiary, Paul provides them with the opportunity once again to choose freedom. He arranges for their escape and helps them spread "the message."<sup>604</sup> He protects them not only so that they can reveal their story but also to advise them how to deliver it for the desired impact. "Whatever you say with your mouths, you need to be saying something different with your bodies and your eyes," he reminds them.<sup>605</sup>

Armed with this inside information, Lincoln and Michael testify to all they have seen and discovered—the existence and purpose of the Company, the ways in which the U.S. government "which is meant to protect and serve us" has betrayed us all, and to Sara and Lincoln's innocence.<sup>606</sup> Their message destroys the

hierarchy constructed in the first season by assigning blame to the deserving parties and removing blame from the scapegoats. The Company responds by denying, distorting, and then burying the message. Lincoln and Paul are discouraged, calling their efforts a "Hail Mary."<sup>70</sup> Michael is hopeful, though another character confirms the larger religious vision that a life built on hope is "for those who live without grace." Hope keeps the prisoners running, but accepting grace through faith sets them free.

Meanwhile, Paul's newfound faith is challenged, and he is tempted to return to his old ways and turn the brothers in. He ultimately continues to help them after he finally abandons his belief in the justice of his old cause. Still, Paul is not relieved of his doubt until he finds himself willing to give up his life for his new friends—Lincoln, Michael, and Sara. Unfortunately, Sara is unable to forgive him for his earlier betrayal and, along with the brothers, she abandons him. In this moment, Paul experiences what mystics call "the dark night of the soul."

In a desperate cry for help, he visits his estranged sister and then attempts to take his own life. When he is unable to pull the trigger, he realizes that there is another way out—surrender. This is when Paul begins to have a little faith. Like his Christian namesake, Paul had served the dominant authorities as a proud and patriotic law-keeper. And his transformation bears some striking similarities to the spiritual confession of his biblical counterpart:

I used to think I should work hard against the followers of the Way. I did that . . . I put many of the followers in prison. The head leaders gave me the right and the power to do it. Then when the followers were killed, I said it was all right. I beat them and tried to make them speak against [each other]. In my fight against them, I kept going after them. . . .<sup>71</sup>

And like Saint Paul the Apostle on the road to Damascus, Paul the former Secret Service agent undergoes a conversion experience and is reborn. His subsequent testimony opens the eyes of the justice system and the media, transforming them from instruments of darkness into instruments of light. In the process, Paul's sins are forgiven. He accepts grace and is "called home," taking his

place in the promised land along with all those who are set apart by having a little faith.

Sara, on the other hand, has a longer road to redemption. She questions the authority of any higher power, including the state, because the Company murdered her father, who was the governor of Illinois. As a recovering addict and self-proclaimed realist, she searches for redemption but finds it difficult to accept grace. This is because she is filled with doubt and longs for her former freer life. When she confesses these things to Michael, he tells her that he sympathizes but that he prefers a different perspective: "I choose to have faith. Without it I have nothing. It's the only thing that is keeping me going."<sup>72</sup>

This conversation is significant because it reinforces Sara's otherness as the one of little faith, as the only woman and a damsel in distress. She is powerless to free herself because she exists only in relation to the men to whom she is tied: Michael as her lover, Paul Kellerman as her nemesis, and to her late father as a disappointment and a burden. These features of Sara's character illuminate an inequity perpetrated by the Judeo-Christian religious vision: "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him . . . He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other."<sup>73</sup> This "expression of a duality . . . of the Self and the Other" extends to all aspects of Sara's experience.<sup>74</sup> Since Sara does not exist for her own benefit, she is the bridge between the men's imprisonment and freedom. She is referred to as "the key" and the conduit to Michael's freedom. Not only does she unlock the door through which he and all the male inmates escape from prison, she also holds the key to evidence that could exonerate his family. Finally, she surrenders herself to the authorities so that Michael can escape to Panama. In taking on this role of servitude, Sara becomes a prisoner of love.

Sara's storyline invites a gendered critique of the fantasy themes and visions at work in *Prison Break*, suggesting that "rather than looking at men as prisoners we . . . look at prisoners as men."<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Sara is true to the faithful attribution associated with her character as an obedient woman of weak faith. She is motivated only by her love for Michael, not by faith in any unseen higher power or in the power of the state (or even in herself). In

pledging her love to Michael, she loses her individual identity to him: internalizing his concerns, pledging to defend him against his enemies, and making all of her resources available to him. In so doing she ironically finds the kind of love that she could only experience by giving up her freedom for his. In this way her actions are consistent with the religious vision of Christ on a cross, putting love on the line. Though understated, the character is surely deeply resonant with *Prison Break's* audience, which is largely female.

Not surprisingly, Sara's sacrifice initially goes unrewarded. Although her physical and invisible shackles (i.e., drug addiction) are removed, like Michael, she remains imprisoned because she does not recognize the person she has become. Still, she is ultimately rewarded for her many sacrifices when Paul testifies on her behalf in court. Yet her freedom is short-lived. When she is released and reunites with Michael in Panama, she shoots a Company agent to save Michael's life. This retriggers the guilt-redemption theme, causing Michael to take the blame for her actions because he knows that her love for him placed her in another dangerous situation.

Then Michael finds himself in a concrete prison again, only this time the prison resembles the deep layers of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. It is darker, scarier, and more tempestuous than any environment he has experienced before. Escape will thus require a stronger display of his faith as he faces his next opportunity for redemption.

### Conclusion

The melodramatic finale of season 2 is consistent with Christian and American civil-religious visions and definitions of faith within a post-9/11 context. First, the ending illustrates the ways in which we are all held captive by our beliefs and the ways in which they can be expressed through symbols and rituals. Second, it reveals the consequences and benefits of acting on these beliefs—sinfulness and redemption, curses and blessings. Third, the ending provides an invitation to the characters, the audience, and the One who "stands at the door and knocks" to continue to participate in the story.<sup>76</sup> Whoever accepts that invitation can have a hand in

shaping the meaning of the word "prisoner" in American culture after 9/11. Fourth, the ending highlights the suffering of others as an appeal to the audience to identify with people in pain, especially those who have been and are victims of terrorism, conspiracy, and abuse. In this way, *Prison Break* asks the audience to wrestle with the issue of religiously inspired violence. The storyline also illustrates that people of faith can transform tragedy into opportunity and accomplish what many prisons fail to do: rehabilitate.

The particular liberation narrative in *Prison Break* is not without its problems. In a sense, the show's audience is held captive to old narratives of subjugation and white privilege insofar as they are asked to identify most closely the suffering of white male characters like Michael and Lincoln. *Prison Break* also insulates viewers from the actual social conditions of the real-life prison population, which is predominantly black and brown and also largely female.

In this way, the technology of television works against its own redemptive potential. Television dramas like *Prison Break* become venues where audiences find mirroring for their feelings—of victimization, virtue, suffering, or faith—in the experiences of fictional characters rather than with their friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens, thus preventing social change. The consequence of this phenomenon is that actual spiritual journeys and notions of country and community are lived out primarily in the realms of mediated fantasy themes. Thus the religious vision empowering us to "have a little faith" is once again positioned as an intermediary between two worlds: the world inside the television and the world outside the box.

On the other hand, "there can be little doubt that . . . television . . . has markedly broadened the forms of public argument and discussion."<sup>77</sup> Televised depictions of faith and civil-religious vision can attract "the unconverted" by urging them to confront the possibility that there are cultural and religious worlds beyond the sphere that individual audience members inhabit. This kind of vision creates discourse communities that do important cultural work by influencing the public agenda through the "mediation of representation."<sup>78</sup>

As forms of mediation, *Prison Break's* faithful attributions, symbols, language, ideals, and visions argue both for and against

the civil-religious worldview that links the justice of God with the justice of government—an evenhandedness that can cause audiences either to question their faith in their government or to more closely examine their cynicism. Still, there is a strong element of paternalism in the show, insofar as the audience is not encouraged to challenge the assumption that the only version of faith that effects social change is the faith that is shaped by the issues and perspectives that are important to people who live in the United States. That said, an alternative reading might be that audiences are encouraged to associate the prisoners' unwillingness to accept grace with the fatal sin of arrogance, which invariably invites dire consequences.

This second reading translates into a powerful religious vision for day-to-day life. Such a vision reveals that clarity, certainty, and confidence are enhanced by faith, imagination, and the suspension of (dis)belief. The ways in which we identify ourselves and others—as prisoners or freed persons, as guilty or redeemed—are constantly called into question. Identities are no longer considered unalterable norms but are instead simply reflections of the social, political, and spiritual contexts in which they appear.

Thus our differences—of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, class, disability, or religious practice—serve not as fixed data of human experience but as fantasy types or mediated representations. In this case, the need for empirical knowledge is replaced with a need for the communication of confident faith. This means that when there is a discrepancy between the way things are and the way things ought to be, the most important differences are not found in plain sight. They are hiding behind prison walls. Television drama crashed through these walls when it brought the problems of conflicting faith and religious vision into our homes on September 11, 2001. I, for one, have a little faith that television drama can be part of the solution to those problems.