

## Pluralism Podcast

Episode 5-Part 1: "Religion in American Prisons" Transcript

### [Introductory Segment]

**Summary:** Your hosts, Maggie Krueger and Cody Musselman, introduce the fifth episode of the Pluralism Podcast, a production of [The Pluralism Project](#) at [Harvard University](#). This organization was founded by Harvard Professor [Diana Eck](#) over two decades ago to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources. [On Common Ground: World Religions in America](#) (or OCG, which you can access at pluralism.org) is one such resource. OCG includes essays, interactive maps, and links to historical documents and current news articles.

This show, in three vignettes, presents a snapshot of the research and information you will find in [On Common Ground](#). These vignettes highlight America's rich religious diversity, her changing religious landscape, and particular moments of encounter in the public sphere.

Today's episode focuses on religious encounters in religion in prisons.

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**Dr. Stern:** Prayer wasn't in my vocabulary and then I stepped into this maximum security prison in 1993 and it was, now in retrospect, kind of a conversion experience or a dark night of the soul. I was walking up to this foreboding physical space and this man, who was shackled around his ankles and chains around waist and hands cuffed behind his back, walks across my path and at the moment that he passed me the sunlight refracted off of the steel shackles around his ankles and temporarily blinded me. And it was as if my life was altered in that moment.

**Maggie:** That's [Kaia Stern](#) reflecting on the first time she visited a prison as a college student. Now a lecturer in Sociology at Harvard University as well as an ordained interfaith minister, Stern has devoted more than 20 years of her professional life advocating for prison reform. She currently serves as the director of the [Prison Studies Project](#) at Harvard University launched in 2008. Stern's book, [Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education and Healing](#), will be available in paperback June 2015.

And I'm [Maggie Krueger](#), a research associate at the Pluralism Project. I had a chance to speak with Stern about her experience teaching and learning from individuals

entrenched in the prison system, which we'll hear later in this episode of the Pluralism Podcast.

**Cody:** Hi everyone, [Cody Musselman](#) here, and Maggie I'm looking forward to hearing the conversation you had with Professor Kaia Stern. And later in the episode we'll hear a conversation that I had with [Harvard Divinity School](#) Student, Amanda Napior, about curriculum she developed to be taught in prisons about letters written by prominent religious and social leaders while in prison.

In addition to guest interviews, today's episode of the [Pluralism Podcast](#) will present snapshots of the research and information you will find in [On Common Ground: World Religions in America](#) (or OCG, which you can access at [pluralism.org](#)). Like the Pluralism Podcast, OCG is a resource developed by [The Pluralism Project](#) at [Harvard University](#) which was founded by Harvard Professor [Diana Eck](#) over two decades ago to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources.

Before we hear more from Kaia Stern and Amanda Napior, Clara González, a friend of the Pluralism Project, will first read an audio essay about Sweat Lodges, found in the [Native Traditions](#) section of [On Common Ground](#).

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### [Vignette 1: Sweat Lodge]

**Summary:** In the first vignette, Clara González, a friend of the Pluralism Project, reads the [On Common Ground](#) audio essay "[Sweat Lodges](#)."

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**Clara:** The ceremonies of the sweat lodge include rites of preparation, prayer, and purification. Many Native Americans today claim the "sweat," as they call it, as an important spiritual tradition, widely shared and resonant with intertribal Native identity. This is especially true for the many Native people who have been raised apart from their own specific tribal traditions. The sweat lodge today plays a very significant role in the lives of Native communities in their efforts to bring about personal and social healing and commitment to collective values. It is said that those who undergo the sweat lodge ceremony together become relatives. Indeed, in the Sioux traditions, participants emerge from the sweat lodge proclaiming, "All my relations!"

The sweat lodge is a structure charged with sacred meaning and power. The domed lodge, about four or five feet high, consists of a lashed “tent” of bent willows, covered with blankets, hides, or tarps to hold in the heat. Because it is often said to represent the totality of the world, and is sometimes called the “navel of the universe,” the construction of a sweat lodge is no casual matter, but an elaborate process. Often built in response to a vision, sweat lodges are constructed with careful preparation, with prayer, and with attention to symbolic detail. The sweat ceremony itself admits of many variations and nuances of meaning, but in every case it involves heating stones until they are red hot, bringing them into the darkened chamber, and pouring water or aromatic herbal teas over them to punctuate the participants’ rounds of fervent prayer.

Participants experience a purification of body, mind, spirit, and community as they feel the heat of the steam and as they offer their prayers and their songs. Because one enters the sweat lodge naked, or virtually naked, and undergoes this rite of cleansing and commitment, the sweat lodge rituals are said to be a kind of rebirth. When one emerges from the sweat lodge, it is common to plunge into a lake, a stream or a pond for a bath. Perhaps it is because this purification integrates physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being that the sweat lodge has become so central in contemporary Native American rites and practices of healing.

To learn more about the religion of [Native Traditions](#) or one of the 17 other traditions profiled by the Pluralism Project, visit [pluralism.org/ocg](http://pluralism.org/ocg) and click on [Religion](#).

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## **[Vignette 2: Interview with Harvard Professor, Dr. Kaia Stern]**

**Summary:** Pluralism Project research associate Maggie Krueger interviews Harvard Professor Dr. Kaia Stern about her work with prison populations as an academic and interfaith minister. Stern encourages listeners to use humanizing language when referring to people in prison, emphasizing that humanity is what is at stake in all prison work. She also highlights faith as a verb. Faith, she notes, is an empowering life force for people who find themselves physically confined, yet spiritually liberated. Stern’s book [Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education and Healing](#), will be available in paperback June 2015.

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**Maggie:** When we first heard from Dr. Kaia Stern at the beginning of this episode she was describing a transformative moment during her senior year of college during one of her first visits to a prison. Stepping into this prison, she recalled, was her first exposure

to the justice system, or a title she finds more appropriate -- the punishment system. We left Stern temporarily blinded by light reflected off of a man's shackles. Let's pick up where she left off.

**Dr. Stern:** At that moment in my life, I think both developmentally, emotionally and politically that [precept that life is suffering](#) resonated. And it was life as suffering. And what also felt like it cracked my mind and my heart open was that the men in my midst, the men who were locked up, seeing them in this oppressive environment, seeing them with chains on, and they're talking about being free--in relationship to God or Allah or a Buddhist practice. This tension between bondage and liberation; both actually, speaking to people whose spirits and minds were alive and thriving, and also knowing many of them were locked up for life. Also spiritually or theologically, what is this tension between 'I am in chains' and 'I am free'? 'I'm bigger than this confinement because I'm a child of God or a servant of Allah, or through my sitting meditation I am free.' I have never been in a prison classroom, a prison setting or with a circle of people in prison that is not interfaith. So if prison is my church, so to speak, or my ministry--with what has become that--and it became very clear to me that the prison classroom is a sacred space, it's a transformative space, it's an interfaith community. It was very clear to me that the work I was meant to do in this life was to continue to go into prisons and to learn from and to teach about prisons. And that was really clear to me from 1993.

**Maggie:** Stern thought a professional relationship with prison communities would be facilitated through becoming a lawyer, but discovered that was not for her.

**Dr. Stern:** There was something about feeling so clear that I am inspired by laws that can't be written. I learned that I would likely have more access into prisons as a "so-called" faith person, than as a lawyer. And so while I realized this is a right path, it's also a strategic path for what I'm committed to do.

**Maggie:** After finishing her doctoral work, Stern became ordained as an [interfaith minister](#). She sees her roles as an activist, an academic and a minister as inseparable. Inspired and motivated by all three identities, Stern also notes that she is sensitive to how society speaks about people in prison.

**Dr. Stern:** I want to bring attention to language. [Eddie Ellis](#) has this [letter on language](#), inviting us to think about the language we use for people in prison. Because often, unwittingly, we reproduce harmful ideologies. And so I invite the Pluralism Project, your readers, your listeners to think about using what Eddie calls humanizing language. Language that emphasizes people's humanity. So talking about people in prison, people on parole and people with criminal records. Rather than inmates, ex-cons, parolees,

welfare mothers, superpredators. All of these terms are devoid of humanity. Humanity is what's at stake. We talk about justice and so often in the name of justice people's human rights are violated. Faith is a life force. Much of my book is about how faith and participation in education are the two means that allow people to resist dehumanization, isolation and social death. Not only to resist, but to thrive. In faith, whether its in the afterlife or in my identity as a servant or child of God, 'I'm free.' What better to counteract this existence of confinement. Or even the tiny cruelties or inhumanities of being counted as a number. Or the tiny privileges, 'No, actually, I don't need to go to the mess hall right now because I'm observing [Ramadan](#).' This is where people assert their humanity, their religious practice. Profound! Profound in prison. And that was a part of what was so humbling to me. I think faith is present, and a precious commodity for sure.

**Maggie:** Stern also touched upon how safety and religious freedoms are sometimes at odds within a prison system.

**Dr. Stern:** Security or safety always trumps religious freedom. Security trumps everything inside of a prison and that's very real. So we can talk about what's on the books and what's law, but when you're actually locked up and under the power of whatever the fear—and you know its always in the name of security and fear—people lose their rights in very real ways.

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### **[Vignette 3: Adapted from a 2005 Pluralism Project Research Report on Sweat Lodges in American Prisons]**

**Summary:** In the first vignette, Clara González, a friend of the Pluralism Project, reads an adaptation from the Pluralism Project Research Report "[Sweat Lodges in American Prisons.](#)"

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**Clara:** This is Clara González, reading the Pluralism Project Research Report "[Sweat Lodges in American Prisons.](#)"

Thousands of Native people incarcerated in Federal and State prisons have expressed interest in using sweat lodges not only to maintain their personal 'religious' faith, but as a way to combat the hostile, sometimes dehumanizing experience of prison. Additionally, many prison chaplains and administrators have noted the benefits for those in prison rehabilitation and have been vocal advocates for sweat lodges. However, in many cases Native people have struggled to obtain such opportunities in prison.

While, the United States Bureau of Prisons website states that "Inmates can observe religious holy days and wear and use religious items consistent with their faith as long as this is consistent with policy and with the security, safety, and good order of the institution," there have been instances that underscore the challenges that remain when putting policy consistently into practice. In 1985, for example, a group of six individuals in a Utah correctional facility sued the state to provide a sweat lodge for their use. They claimed "they couldn't practice an integral part of their religion--the sweat lodge ceremony--without such a structure." The state opposed the construction of a sweat lodge based on security concerns. In accordance with the guidance of the court, Utah authorities spoke with prison officials in the state of Nebraska, where sweat lodge had been sponsored and constructed on prison grounds. The Nebraska authorities pointed out the positive aspects of the lodge and noted that the security concerns they had with the construction of the lodge were resolved. In 1989, the court determined that the state of Utah must permit construction of a sweat lodge on prison grounds and bear the cost as they would for any other religious structure, such as a chapel, built on prison property.

Not all requests for sweat lodges have been successful. For Darrell Young Elk Rich, a member of the Cherokee nation, prison served as a transformative time to study his heritage, in which he learned the Cherokee language and began to see a spiritual advisor. Through his studies, Rich came to see the sweat lodge as significant in its physical, emotional, and spiritual healing properties. San Quentin prison, where Young Elk was incarcerated, had a sweat lodge on the premises, as did 95 other prisons across the country at the time, which had been used by Native American inmates for sweat lodge ceremonies since the 1980s. When Young Elk submitted a petition on March 8, 2000 to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony, his request was denied five days later. In the decision, the San Quentin warden cited safety and security concerns. The State of California executed Darrell Young Elk Rich by lethal injection on evening of March 15th. He was never allowed to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony, which he had hoped would serve as his last spiritual rites.

While Darrell Young Elk Rich's religious freedom claim did not prevail, more recent court rulings have offered some promise. In January 2014, a Tenth Circuit court in Wyoming sided with the rights of an individual incarcerated, citing the Religion Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000. The court stated that the prison had not shown a compelling reason for denying the individual sweat lodge access. In these instances, Native people join others—including Muslims, Buddhists, Rastafarians—who struggle to have their right to exercise religious practices recognized within the prison system.

To learn more about [Native Traditions](#) or one of the other religious traditions profiled by the Pluralism Project, visit [pluralism.org/ocg](http://pluralism.org/ocg) and click on [Religion](#).

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#### [Vignette 4: Interview with Amanda Napior]

**Summary:** In the final vignette, Pluralism Project Research Associate Cody Musselman speaks with [Amanda Napior](#) about a curriculum she developed around letters written from prison, to be taught in prison. Napior's inspiration for the course came from her experiences teaching in prisons. She notes that for people in prison, letter writing is one of the primary ways of passing time.

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**Cody:** Next we'll hear an interview I conducted with Harvard Masters of Divinity candidate, Amanda Napior. Prior to coming to Harvard, Amanda volunteered in a Western Massachusetts prison teaching yoga. Amanda has continued to teach in prisons as a Masters student. In the summer of 2014 she taught courses in American religious history, creative writing and mediation. She has developed a new course to be taught in prison that focuses on letters written in prison by prominent religious and social leaders. Let's hear what she had to say.

**Amanda:** So in fall I took a class around the letter of [Paul](#) with [Professor Laura Nasrallah](#) out of HDS and that class, I suppose, was the intellectual catalyst for me to be able to use a recent experience I had teaching in a house of correction in Western Mass. in an academic project specifically creating a course for an incarcerated population. So it was the course materials she presented that first gave me the idea because many of the letters are to Paul, or two in particular are prison epistles, two of them are verified to be written by Paul. Very quickly however the project started to get larger than Paul because I think that in my experience working with people in prison I have wanted the courses to always have an angle of self cultivation, so I started to ask, how can we read these letters and other letters written from prison in a way that also reflects on the questions we are asking back at ourselves. And so [Paul Tillich's](#) notion of "ultimate concern" came to mind, so I wanted to use that as the central question that we would start to ask the various texts, which would then give us a vehicle to ask introspective questions of our own letters and our own writing as well.

**Cody:** Great. So can you speak more specifically about the details of the syllabus? Whose letters do you engage?

**Amanda:** Yes, absolutely. The authors we are reading include—I have a list right here—[Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), [Nelson Mandela](#), [Sir Thomas More](#), [Nadezhda Tolokonnikova](#), [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#), Paul, of course, [Joseph Smith](#), [Oscar Wilde](#) and Aung San Suu Kyi. One note is that [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) was not in prison but under house arrest and her writings from that time that I have been able to find are actually very few but in the interest of including more female voices, I opened the scope so as to include one more. So that's who we are reading. The class itself is ten weeks long. I listed nine names. So the first week would be delving into selections from the "[Dynamics of Faith](#)," by [Paul Tillich](#) which would allow us to take apart his terms and understand what he means by ultimate concern and then students will have an opportunity to assess whether ultimate concern and other Tillich terms are appropriate ways for them to describe meaning and to define purpose and if that language does not fit I want them to find their own language because Tillich, of course, came from a very particular 20th century Protestant context that will not be the context of many of my students. Certainly not the Protestant context. And then another bit about the course design is that there will be a combination of critical reading and writing, creative writing, as well as a self-cultivation aspect by which I mean practicing in meditation and mindfulness. And we will use that in the reading and writing as well as hopefully in the students lives after class.

**Cody:** And now as you were speaking and talking about the list of people you included, help me remember, did you include [Malcolm X](#)?

**Amanda:** No.

**Cody:** Now why is that? Because he is a very well known figure for having come to the [Nation of Islam](#) during his own prison experience, and that reads through in his autobiography. So I am wondering what your decision was behind not including him?

**Amanda:** I did not choose to include Malcolm X because I could not find letters he had written. He writes in his autobiography about writing letters, but he doesn't actually include the letters, to the best of my knowledge. If I found letters from him, I would love to include him.

**Cody:** Interesting. So that's really another way of framing your course; it's about the letters.

**Amanda:** It's about the letters. Thank you for mentioning that because another way that my goals of the class link into this self cultivation aspect, even in terms of having the students relate to the writers we are reading, regardless of how different their reasons for incarceration, is that for people in prison writing letters is something that they do a lot



of. Depending on the time of year there may not be a lot of programming. Writing letters is one of the very few things that gives people an activity to do, other than ground maintenance jobs, or kitchen jobs, especially if there are no other classes or programs at the time. So the act of writing letters is something that I think, that I hope people will be able to relate to, inherently.

**Cody:** So you mention there will be a creative writing component. Are students themselves expected to write letters?

**Amanda:** Well, there will be a few creative assignments to be turned in. Much of their writing assignments will be creative in that they will be journaling every week and then there will be a couple of critical assignments. The creative can be letters that they write which would of course be somewhat more constructive than usual because it would be for a class. Or the creative writing project for the final could be a memoir. So either way I want them to be writing autobiographically.

**Cody:** And that leads me to the next question, which is, something you have touched on a little bit already. But what are the intended outcomes of this course. You have mentioned self-reflection and even pointing toward mindfulness. So if you could talk about the objectives for this course.

**Amanda:** Sure, yes. I think my overarching objective is that I want to offer students something that helps students to find a sense of inner and outer purpose and to cultivate tools that allows them to find presence and patience when that purpose is completely lost. And so, the three components of the class which are the intellectual rigour of writing and reading, the creative writing aspect and the self-cultivation aspect of mindfulness practices of various traditions that help us cultivate stillness, those all help serve that end, or that is my intention at least.

**Cody:** So in the creation of the syllabus, was there any figure that stood out to you of the nine you listed for which you have a particular affinity?

**Amanda:** Yes, absolutely. I think I have a special affinity to them all if I am being honest but I think that I am probably most excited about Martin Luther King, Jr.'s [letter from Birmingham jail](#). We are reading him right after Tillich and the reason for that is that I imagined many, if not all, of my students will be familiar with Martin Luther King, Jr., however they may not be familiar with how Paul Tillich's theology influenced King. And so in that letter, King actually, from memory -- because he did not have his theological texts with him -- from memory he crafts his letter based on various theologians, one of which is Tillich. And so I am hoping this letter will be a vehicle to enter the unknown

through the familiar which I think is exciting and I hope others will find it that as well. And I also think King's writing is so important to return to because of his work on love and justice and I think especially with the events of the last year—I am thinking of [Ferguson](#), I am think of [Staten Island](#)—that is thought is so urgent to study and could be particularly resonate in a prison setting.

So to be quite practical about it, the class will meet two days a week for an hour and a half each day, so three hours total. And so the meditation and mindfulness component I hope to bring in to the last half hour of each class, or the last half hour of each class will be filled with either that component or various introspective creative writing exercises. And so that aspect of the course is designed to give students tools to check into their bodies. That is a piece, I think, of all learning whether we're checking in with our bodies intentionally or not that is implicitly there, but because it is not often engaged, we are often not aware of the fact that all experience is happen through our bodies. So I say, if we actually bring awareness to it in a classroom setting, how much more available will we be to whatever we are noticing in what we read and what we write. And so, my aim with that is really to teach basic meditation. And the way we'll use that with the reading will be then to notice what our responses are to the reading rather than thinking about them intellectually, seeing what emotion, what sensations are arising, noticing if those sensations are unpleasant or something that is triggering us and then using creative writing exercises to inquire about, "hey, what is that about, why is this triggering me." Or similarly if something feels really pleasurable, if there is something you really love that you encounter in the text, I want to know what the feels like or I want the students to start to investigate what that feels like and why. And so my hope is that we can be more present with what we are reading by actually becoming more present with our own experiences of reading. And then when we are writing the same sort of stuff will happen. And so, you know, these are practices that will start in stillness. We might do some basic walking meditation as well around the room to start learning how to bring stillness into movement, but really these practices, we'll uses these with the reading and writing but then they are practices that people can bring out into their lives as well.

**Cody:** So now, your project touches upon both religion and education within the prison system. So in your opinion, what is the importance of opportunities for religious practice or just the whole category of religious freedom within a prison system. And then similarly what do you see as the importance of educational opportunities within the prison system.

**Amanda:** Well, as to the first question about the importance of religious practice and freedom in a prison system, the first thing that comes to mind is that so many of these letters would not exist if it weren't for the recourse toward religious practice that these

leaders we are reading had. And that religious practice and that various ways of seeking meaning and their relationship to self, others and world made these people the influential leaders they were or are, in the case of some contemporary figures. In another way I think that if we want whole people to return to society, to contribute to society then we have to encourage programs and access to ways of relating to oneself that cultivate wholeness and for so many people I think that religious practice is one of them. And depending on how we define religion that could really encompass so much. It doesn't have to look like something that falls within a faith tradition, certainly, but I think that without the possibility of being able to explore religious practice as one of the options, we're not setting people up to have them have successful returns to society. As for the question about the importance of education in prisons, copious research shows the recidivism declines when higher education abounds. I couldn't say this more emphatically. And so, I think that the higher degrees that people have when they have access to higher education is a piece of this, because they have greater employment opportunities, but the self-esteem that comes from applying yourself to rigorous work is an invisible aspect of this. It cannot be said enough. So again, if we want to encourage whole people returning to society, we have to treat them like whole people. And we have to give them opportunities that allow them to grow in their own understandings of what it means to be a human being, living in this complex thing that we call life. And education is a part of that and recourse to religion is part of that for many people, I dare say most people. So yeah, both of them are hugely important.

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**Maggie:** Many thanks to Professor Kaia Stern, Amanda Napior, Clara González

**Cody:** ...and you, our listeners, for tuning in to this episode of the Pluralism Podcast. Check out our online resource [On Common Ground](#) for more at [pluralism.org](http://pluralism.org).

**Maggie:** For the [Pluralism Podcast](#), I'm Maggie Krueger

**Cody:** and I'm Cody Musselman.