

# Playing the Blame Game: A Critique of Neoliberal, Trauma-Informed, Prison Yoga

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Rose Parkes is a part-time PhD student with the Open University, UK under the supervision of Dr Suzanne Newcombe (Religious Studies) and Dr Deborah Drake (Criminology). Her doctorate entitled 'Neoliberal Yoga, Lived Religion and Prison Abolition' seeks to evaluate the political and religious/spiritual beliefs of Prison Yoga Teachers and the extent to which they are working towards prison abolition. Rose has worked in criminal justice for over twenty years including as a social worker, probation officer and as a prison yoga teacher. She is currently employed as Associate Dean (Academic Programmes) for the Institute of Law, Jersey.

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People in globalised capitalist democracies are reported to be living in secular communities where religion no longer plays a significant role in cultural life. The decline of orthodox religion has contributed to a growth in what is termed 'spiritual, but not religious' practices (Carey, 2018, p. 261). This drop in organised religion relates to an expansion in alternative forms of spirituality as people seek to find meaning in individual and personalised ways. Declining church attendance, rejection of doctrine, and hierarchical theology have led to an academic focus on the everyday beliefs, behaviours, and practices that people engage in; what religious studies scholars have often described as 'lived religion' (Bender, 2012; McGuire, 2016). As part of this changing landscape, there has been a corresponding increase in yoga and meditation, including trauma-informed approaches. These practices have now extended to secure settings, and, over the last decade, there has been a proliferation of prison yoga classes. Burgeoning research suggests there is a range of health and well-being benefits for people in prisons associated with regular class attendance. But, more recently, some studies have taken a critical view of how prison yoga may foster imprisoned people's docility and compliance with harsh regimes as part of the neoliberal prison industrial complex.

This presentation will critically consider the way in which neoliberal Prison Yoga Teachers (PYTs) offer trauma-informed yoga to increase the self-regulation and compliance of people in prison, keeping the emphasis on individual pathology and personal responsibility. This focus, arguably, accords with the punitive politics of 'tough on law-and-order' politicians raising the question of whether PYTs and prison yoga projects are at risk of institutionalisation rather than being a practice to promote social justice, structural transformation, and liberation.

(283 words)

## References

Bender, C. (2012) 'Practicing Religions', in R. A. Orsi (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 273-295.

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McGuire, M. B. (2016) 'Individual Sensory Experiences, Socialized Senses, and Everyday Lived Religion in Practice', *Social Compass*, 63(2), pp. 152-162.

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