

Book Review

Jens Soering: *The Convict Christ / Richtet nicht...*

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Introduction

Richtet nicht, damit ihr nicht gerichtet werdet. (Do not judge others..., Lk 6:37) is the German title of a book originally written in English (*The Convict Jesus*) by the German US-detainee Jens Soering. But a book review has to judge, for that is the essence of a review. Soering himself has been judged. For many his name will be unknown but European human rights activists know his name very well. The Soering case has become famous for it was brought to the European Court of Human Rights. Soering was a suspect in a double murder case which happened in the US. Death penalty could be the final verdict. The European Court had to decide whether it was justified to expel someone from Europe who could face the death penalty in the US. At the end Soering was expelled (with certain guarantees) and convicted to a double life sentence. Soering has been imprisoned since 1986.



The book opens with a fragment from a sermon of Karl Barth. Barth spoke this sermon in the prison of Basel (Switzerland) in 1957, and it was about Lk 23:33. Barth notes that Jesus dies amid sinners and criminals. They form also the first Christian community: a group of sinners. And this is still true nowadays: the community of Christians is still a community of sinners.

Soering takes this as a starting point for his book in which he looks at Jesus and the Bible from this angle: a man who died like a criminal and amid criminals and who invites a criminal to join him in heaven. Soering starts with several passages from the NT in which prisoners, judges and victims of criminal behaviour play a major role. It leads Soering to the key question of this book: What would Jesus nowadays do when confronted with detainees? This question offers Soering the opportunity to link the Bible and the prison system.

Contents

Chapter 1 links Jesus' sermon in the synagogue to the American penal system. Soering disagrees with the often heard idea that Jesus' message has no social consequences. Jesus is not only concerned about the spiritual liberation of people. Soering links this insight with the disproportional amount of detainees in the US, where Christian compassion with and interest in detainees seem to be absent.

The second chapter is about the man with demons (Lk 8: 27). The story opens the possibility to focus on the mental health care of detainees. Chapter 3 tells the story of the woman who committed adultery (Jh 8) and who is at the point to be executed. Soering points out that Jesus doesn't reject the death penalty but that he focuses on conversion of all who are involved: the woman and her attackers. According to Soering it is not necessary any more to kill each other for Jesus died for us. Moreover, death penalty or a life long sentence makes conversion impossible,

Jesus' support and defending of John the Baptist is related to the support of others which Soering has witnessed (chapter 4). Without support of others he wouldn't have survived in prison.

Chapter 5 is relatively short and takes the execution of John the Baptist as starting point to look critically at the policy of medical care in prison. Soering concludes an immense disinterest in the fate and well being of detainees.

Chapter 6 focuses on the Samaritan (Lk 10) and associates the victim of the robbery with the detainees who become a victim of rape during their detention. They share the role of being a victim who is completely ignored by most people.

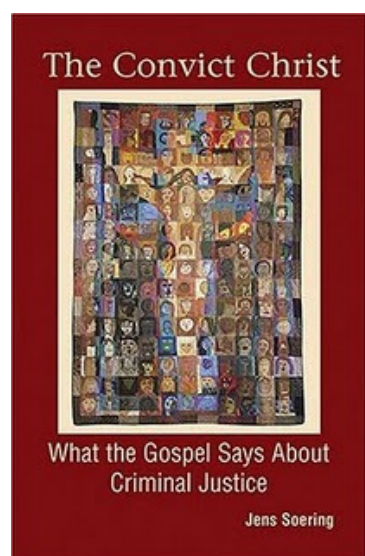
The widow and the judge (Lk 18) have a key role in chapter 7. This story gives the author the opportunity to look closer at the long-lasting legal procedures.

In the eighth chapter Soering provocatively links the Biblical command to love your neighbour to the story of a pedophile. His concern is to criticize the condemnation of these people which is complete and without nuance.

Chapter 9 is about the paracletic aspects in Jesus' Gospel message. Soering associates these with a critical look at the level and possibilities for the poor of legal assistance.

The next chapter (10) is about the behavior of the Roman soldiers during the process and crucifixion of Jesus. Is there any difference with the behavior of American soldiers in Iraqi prisons? And what about Simon from Cyrene, the black foreigner who gets involved without wanting it? Soering uses the story to tell us about racism in the legal system.

Eph. 4,28 in chapter 12 (Stop robbing and start working) is the starting point to plea for education during detention, and the suicide of Samson is linked to the suicide of a cell mate (chapter 13). And finally, in the last chapter (14, Resurrection) Soering tell about his own resurrection which in fact is his own conversion.



Evaluation: invitation for a discussion

Soering has found in prison the meaning of Jesus' life. This book is the result of his personal process of conversion. It makes this book what we call an ego document. At the same time it is more than just that. Soering doesn't reduce his conversion into a strict personal, inner process. On the contrary, he relates this process to many social issues which are really important in the daily reality of detention. The book relates Soering to other detainees, his personal belief to political facts, and the Bible to the detention system. It needs no explanation that the prophetic (= critical) tone is dominant in the book. This one-sided accent makes that one misses sometimes the nuance. At the same time this accent provokes discussions and questions concerning important detention issues.

Soering has the courage to relate directly his personal experiences to Biblical stories and figures, and vice versa. There is a risk in doing this, at the same time it opens new surprising perspectives. And of course, one can criticize the one-sided prophetic approach, but this approach has the big advantage that it provokes the reader to think (and to discuss) about the connection between our detention system and the Gospel. To stimulate the thinking and the discussion every chapter ends with questions. It makes this book especially suitable to start a discussion/dialogue with volunteers or other 'outsiders'. There remains only one major disadvantage to use this book: its context is the US and that its 'Sitz im Leben' is very different from other countries. In the US the author won with this book the Catholic Press Association's Award 2007.

Jens Soering, *The Convict Christ. What the Gospel Says about Criminal Justice*, Orbis Books, New York, 2006.

Jens Soering, *Richtet nicht, damit ihr nicht gerichtet werdet. Barmherzigkeit und Strafvollzug*, Wuerzburg: Echter Verlag, 2008, 199 p.