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BOOK REVIEW *KARLA FAYE TUCKER SET FREE: LIFE AND FAITH ON DEATH ROW*

RESEÑA AL LIBRO: *KARLA FAYE TUCKER LIBERADA: FE Y LA VIDA EN EL CORREDOR DE LA MUERTE*

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Equip the Saints

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Estados Unidos de América

By Linda Strom. (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2006. Pp. 240) (ISBN 0-87788-775-6, \$11.99)

While written from a totally religious perspective, *Karla Faye Tucker Set Free: Life and Faith on Death Row (Set Free)* is especially useful to aid in the understanding of religious commitments or conversion experiences and their resultant behavioral outcomes of persons on death rows in prisons across the United States of America (US). This informative and evidential value extends not only to religious professionals such as prison chaplains, but also to others with interest or stake in issues relating to capital punishment, death row experiences, and/or with the carrying out of executions. Useful for the academy, for those who practice law, and for criminal justice practitioners, *Set Free* offers a helpful glimpse into amazingly valuable human interactions founded on hope and developing trust in the most hopeless settings imaginable.

Penologists have good reason to doubt the veracity of the claims of death row inmates who maintain they have experienced changed lives through *jail house religious conversions*: First, most people will lie in order to escape death. Second, if the claim of religious experience might bring perks or favors from staff or visitors, many inmates would be expected to feign conversions. And third, in the case of Karla Faye Tucker, when her lawyers and supporting pious individuals and groups pushed Governor George W. Bush to grant Tucker executive clemency, those opposed argued that her claim of faith was a scam carefully orchestrated to avoid execution: This is the common dispute against granting clemency based upon the religious conversion and redeemed life assertion.

It is certain that those who knew the facts related to Tucker's capital crime, whether correctional professionals or citizens, would have some doubt about the

authenticity of her religious conversion in the Harris County Jail during her murder trial in Houston: First of all, the crimes she committed were horrific and gruesome. Along with her friend, Danny Garrett, she hacked a man and woman to death in their bed with a pickaxe she found leaning against the bedroom wall.

Secondly, Tucker, Garrett, and Jimmy Leibrant had broken into the house of the victims to steal motorcycle parts; so technically once the murders were committed, the theft became the much more serious crime of *felony murder* as well. But the fact which so many remembered, as well as the evidence which probably insured her death sentence, was that Tucker bragged to a girlfriend that with every swing of the pickaxe she had experienced a sexual climax.

So, was Karla Faye Tucker a horrible, heartless, and almost daemonic killer; or was she a born-again saint? The student of the death penalty is forced to consider this dichotomy. In her book, *Wretched Sisters: Examining Gender and Capital Punishment*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), Mary Welek Atwell shares the following insight: *The Karla Faye Tucker who worked as a high priced prostitute, used every drug in the pharmacopoeia, loved fights and motorcycles, and cursed like a sailor could not have been more different from the person on death row described by her religious supporters as an angel, a compassionate friend, a "most beautiful Christian Women."* (P., 64). Indeed, if the old Karla Faye Tucker is correctly described above, it follows that her change to the new and improved, Christian and altruistic Tucker on the Texas death row, is indeed an altogether amazing conversion -- a transformation difficult to believe since it extends so far beyond the parameters of normal human experience.

The author, Linda Strom is co-founder of the non-profit organization, Discipleship Unlimited, a healing ministry for prisoners, their families, and others in need of healing. *Set Free* belongs to the same *genre* as the book which reports on the life and execution of Velma Barfield, **Woman on Death Row**. By Velma Barfield. Forward by Ruth Bell Graham. Afterward by Anne Graham Lotz. (Nashville, TN: Oliver-Nelson Books, 1985. Pp. xii, 175) (ISBN 0-8407-9531-9, \$16.99 -- Amazon.com).

The Karla Faye Tucker case is one of the most controversial death penalty cases of the late 20th Century. Only 25 years of age when she was sentenced for capital murder in 1984, she lived on death row in Gatesville, Texas until her execution on February 3, 1998. Tucker was the first woman to be executed by the State of Texas since 1863, and the first woman to be executed in the US since 1984. An international movement arose on behalf of Karla Faye Tucker seeking the commutation of her sentence to life imprisonment: Her supporters cited both her sex/gender and her well-known Christian conversion and service to others on death row, to her fellow inmates as well as to correctional staff. Supporters argued that Karla Faye Tucker was the one person who was able to turn death row into a place of hope and of life.

Like Velma Barfield before her, Tucker explained that because of her religious faith she was at ease with her own demise, and therefore she did not fear her state-planned execution. Other death row inmates echo Tucker's claim to transformations in life and focus resulting from their religious conversion experiences while in jail or on death row. Barfield, who was executed in 1984, and Anthony Graves, who was declared innocent and released from prison in 2010 after serving 18 years on a death

sentence (personal communication, February 2011), each give accounts similar to that of Tucker's.

Karla Faye Tucker Set Free: Life and Faith on Death Row will be found most useful as a companion volume to a primary textbook in a college correctional course. Since the book is dated, the cost of copies is reasonably priced: Therefore, its focused questions about the human psyche and possibility of personality change, its impressive content, plus its affordability, make the book a valuable *and* economical assignment to correctional students as a resource for writing response papers or for practicing the writing of book reviews.