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Abstract

A preliminary exploration of the contemporary literature on imprisonment and religion suggests three dominant themes: role/effectiveness; risk/security, and human rights. While these themes are interconnected, the literature is broadly characterised by competing and contradictory research questions and conclusions. When taken together, this body of criminological work offers a complex but partial account of the role of religion in contemporary prisons which does not appear to engage with questions about how the provision of religious services is mediated by local prison governance structures.

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Interrogating Religion in Prison: Criminological Approaches

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Abstract: *A preliminary exploration of the contemporary literature on imprisonment and religion suggests three dominant themes: role/effectiveness; risk/security, and human rights. While these themes are interconnected, the literature is broadly characterised by competing and contradictory research questions and conclusions. When taken together, this body of criminological work offers a complex but partial account of the role of religion in contemporary prisons which does not appear to engage with questions about how the provision of religious services is mediated by local prison governance structures.*

Introduction

The development of the modern prison is intimately connected to Christian religious notions of reform, activated through silence, religious observation, religious instruction and work (Foucault 1977; Sullivan 2009). Apart from the influence of religious ideas on prison architecture (Bentham's panopticon for example), religion penetrated early prison regimes. Religious organisations were also among the first pioneers of community corrections (or probation services as they were widely known) in England and Wales, the United States of America and elsewhere (Vanstone 2004). There are at least two key points here, first that religion has long been deeply connected to the state administration of punishment in western democratic countries and second that the practice of punishment- its form and extent- has been developed in reference to Christian ideas of reform and salvation.

Despite these foundational connections there exists relatively little criminological literature on the contemporary connections between religion and imprisonment. More specifically, there remain gaps in the ways that criminology as a discipline engages with the *operationalization* of religious rights and services in contemporary prison policy and practice. The existing literature is further limited by its largely American focus. The published work reviewed here [\[1\]](#) has been thematically organised into three broad areas: role/effectiveness; risk/security, and human rights. All of these themes are characterised by contradictory research directions and conclusions which complicates our understanding of the status of religion in prisons today.

Role/Effectiveness

The first, and largest, thematic area refers to the literature that asks questions about the role and purpose of religion for prisoners and, relatedly, the effectiveness of religious practices and programs on prisoner welfare and recidivism. Highlighted in this body of work is the utilisation of

religion by prisoners as a coping mechanism and the subsequent protection that this offers from the pains and deprivations associated with imprisonment (see Clear et al 2000; Clear & Sumter 2002, Dammer 2002). In the language of Correctional services, religion may have 'protective' properties that help prisoners to psychologically manage prison life and that reduce the likelihood of reoffending upon release (see O'Connor & Perreyclear 2002).

Influenced by Sykes (1958), this research typically comes from the starting point that prisons are unique, complex and hostile environments marked by various 'pains'. In this type of environment religion, it is argued, offers a potential coping mechanism for prisoners. An example is Clear et al's (2000) account of the meaning and role of religion in prison. Drawing on Allport's work (1960, in Clear et al 2000) the authors detail examples of intrinsic and extrinsic benefits and motivations for engaging with religion in prison. Intrinsic motivations include easing the process of adjustment to imprisonment, managing feelings of guilt, and identifying a positive way forward in life. Extrinsic motivations for religious identification in prison included enhancing perceived and actual safety from threatening prisoners, generating material comforts and increasing access to visitors.

There is also a growing body of work that has evaluated various faith-based correctional programs with a view to establishing their rehabilitative impact- the task there has been to establish whether programs informed by religion can be an effective tool to reduce reoffending. This is related to the work on religion as a coping or adjustment mechanism as it is supposed that greater adjustment in prison, or the enhancement of coping skills, will enable the prisoner to better manage the reintegration process and lead a law abiding life upon release. Jensen and Gibbons (2002) for example concluded that strong expressions of shame and religiosity were linked to lower levels of recidivism or parole violation following release from prison.

Risk/Security

The second theme is about the relationships between religious beliefs and practices and the management of safety and security in the prison setting. There are several elements to this work: one element documents the historical administrative perception of some religious movements (such as Nation of Islam and Native American ceremonial activities) as primarily political rather than religious, troublesome and illegitimate thereby representing a threat to the safety and security of the prison (see Ammar et al 2004; Vezzola 2007). A contemporary manifestation of this concern has been the reported perception of the cynical adoption of religion by gang members to communicate with each other in prison which has undermined prison security strategies (Thomas and Zaitzow 2006).

Another element to this work is the emergence of the prison chaplain as risk manager. Hicks (2012) for example has documented the internalisation of risk narratives by prison chaplains. By socialising prison chaplains predominantly in reference to risk and threat, Hicks argues that the institutional goal of maintaining security first are realised with relatively little economic investment from the institution. This work identifies the contemporary prison chaplain role as less about autonomous pastoral care

and more closely related to corrections officer (see also Sundt & Cullen 1998).

It is important to note that there are thematic overlaps as Jiang and Winfrey (2006 in Kerley and Copes 2008: 241) suggest: *"in the interests of the overall health and safety of inmates and correctional personnel, the goal for prison administrators is to identify resources that will help inmates cope with the challenges of prison"*. In other words the role of religion in promoting coping skills increases the possibility of a calm and safe prison environment. From a management perspective (which prioritises security) religion is a useful mechanism which enhances social control and maintains a stable and secure prison environment.

Human Rights

The final theme in the contemporary literature examining religion in prison focuses on human rights. It documents the local, national and international instruments in various jurisdictions including England and Wales, Victoria and the U.S. that speak to the connection between human rights and religion. These instruments commonly contain protections for the freedom to adopt, believe and demonstrate religion through worship, individually or as part of a religious community (see The Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities in Victoria, Articles 14 and 19).

The literature on human rights has on one hand investigated the extent to which these human rights obligations are met by prisons. It has highlighted instances of faith-based discrimination and charted the ways in which various religious beliefs and/or practices are held up for scrutiny at different times. Vezzola's (2007) discussion of the constitutional rights of Native American prisoners showcased the unresolved imbalance between legal rights-based instruments for ensuring religious freedom and administrative decision making in prisons. Importantly, Vezzola notes that legal religious protections are subordinated to institutional concerns about security and further, that the threshold for prioritising institutional restrictions on religious practices is very low.

The second strand of human rights literature has explored the extent to which religious rights are enforceable or even desirable (see Sullivan 2005; Beaman 2013). In addressing this research question the literature has variously considered what counts as religion, who decides, and according to what criteria and how we might manage 'rights' in light of increasing religious and cultural diversity in prisons. An example of this type of work includes Beckford's (2013) recent analysis of the response to religious diversity in prisons in England and Wales and the impact of ideology on religion in prison. Beckford argues that a series of contentious issues remain that undermine the equitable division of resources across different faith groups. The contentious issues include the amount of religious diversity in contemporary prisons in England and Wales; the extent of diversity within a faith 'category', the diversity of religious 'needs' for prisoners and the impact of formal recognition (or otherwise) of a religious orientation on procuring resources and services in prison.

One of the implications that emerges from the work on religious rights and imprisonment is that while

there exist human rights protections for religious freedom, they are superseded by management imperatives. Management imperatives are governed first and foremost by security and secondly by resources. We return to an earlier point, that there are overlaps between the core thematic concerns around religion and imprisonment. However, what has *not* emerged from this exploration of the contemporary literature is the relative weight given to these interconnected thematic concerns as they are operationalized in the prison environment.

A reading of the contemporary literature leaves us with a paradox. From a prison management perspective accounts of extrinsic motivations for religious engagement could lend support to a cynical interpretation of instrumental 'jailhouse conversions'. If this is viewed through the security frame that dominates contemporary prison administration the likely result would be a scaling back of religious services and freedoms in prison environments. Conversely, the literature detailing the effectiveness of faith-based practices and programs on coping mechanisms and recidivism rates coupled with a reading of the literature that highlights the importance of legislative and constitutional human rights protections would likely result in a commitment to relatively generous and comprehensive faith-based services in prison.

In order to appreciate the status, role and practice of religion in contemporary prisons it is necessary to document the ways in which concerns about security and risk, human rights and the role and effectiveness of faith-based activities are interpreted and prioritised at local governance and institutional levels. Moreover, it is crucial to combine these concerns with a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary governance frameworks that structure institutional decision making.

Conclusion

When it is possible to argue for an expansion of religious services on the basis of enforcing human rights legislation and facilitating adjustment to imprisonment; *and* it is possible to argue for a reduction in faith-based services on the grounds of security concerns and the challenges of equitably distributing resources in increasingly diverse prisons, we need to understand the local decision making frameworks that guide the operationalization of religion in prison. This 'middle tier' in analytic terms would sit between the existing literature on the legislative treatment of religion and prisoners' experiences of religion. Addressing this gap is crucial as local prison governance structures shape the application of legislation in correctional services.

Footnotes:

[1.](#) This is an exploratory account of the literature representing recent (published in the last 15 years) and typical work on prison and religion, published across a range of key journals.

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