

Religion and Responsibility-Taking Among Offenders in Colombia and South Africa: A Qualitative Assessment of a Faith-Based Program in Prison

Matthew Lee Anderson¹, Jason J. Burt¹, Sung Joon Jang¹, Karen Booyens², Byron R. Johnson¹, and Michael Joseph¹

¹Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA

²University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

***Corresponding Author:**

Matthew Lee Anderson, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97236, Waco, TX 76798-7151, USA. Email: Matthew_L_Anderson@baylor.edu

Abstract

This paper examines whether religion contributes to offenders taking responsibility for crimes. Specifically, we assessed whether participation in *The Prisoner's Journey* (TPJ), a bible study program, increased or decreased responsibility-taking. We also examined whether religious offenders that did not participate in TPJ were likely to take responsibility for their offenses. For this study, we conducted a quasi-experiment in two Colombian and five South African prisons from 2018 to 2019, collecting data from personal interviews with a total of 73 inmates—42 TPJ participants and 31 non-participants—before and after the program. Offenders frequently offered subtle accounts of responsibility that incorporated their own agency with other factors. Highly religious offenders were equally likely to take responsibility, and in some cases participation in TPJ heightened responsibility. In sum, this paper presents evidence that religious beliefs and practice are commensurate with responsibility-taking and desistance from crime.

Keywords

responsibility, religion, desistance, agency, blame

Introduction

There is a burgeoning literature on the prosocial effects religious practices have on offenders (Jang et al., 2018, pp. 162–180; Jang et al., 2019; Johnson, 2011; Johnson et al., 2021). Researchers have found that religion improves offenders' emotional well-being, sense of meaning and purpose, virtuous behaviors, acts of gratitude, forgiveness, reconciliation, service to others, and accountability. In sum, religion has been found to aid the process of rehabilitation (Johnson & Jang, 2012, pp. 117–150).

Nevertheless, skepticism about religion's salutary effect endures—and for some good reasons. Saradijan and Nubos (2003) suggest that clergy offenders use religious beliefs as “cognitive distortions,” which foster criminal conduct. Such distorted beliefs attribute responsibility for their bad conduct to external forces, including God (Saradijan & Nobus, 2003, p. 915). Topalli et al. (2013) raise similar worries, though rather than outsource responsibility offenders expressed considerable confidence in God's forgiveness (Topalli et al., 2013, p. 60). Winder et al. (2018) suggest that religion is a “risky script.” They worry that appeals to religious beliefs “contribute to an unhelpful and less proactive approach to taking personal responsibility for their desistance from reoffending,” as religion risks making offenders “passive agents in their offending” (Winder et al., 2018, p. 249).

These important worries complicate whether religion aids desistance. In recent years, theories of desistance have shifted to emphasize offenders' agency (Hallet & McCoy, 2015, pp. 855–872). Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) account of identity transformation and Giordano et al. (2002) ‘cognitive transformation’ theories both underscore the need for offenders to undertake agentic control to desist from further criminal conduct. These theories overlap with Braithwaite's (2006) emphasis on offenders actively taking responsibility for their crimes as an outcome of restorative justice processes. For Braithwaite, passive responsibility happens when we hold others accountable for past actions, while active responsibility is the virtue of “taking responsibility for putting something right into the future” (Braithwaite, 2006, p. 42). Offenders who desist are not merely held responsible, but take responsibility. If religious belief and practices are conducive to offenders' identity transformation and their desistance, they must be compatible with offenders taking responsibility for their wrongs rather than deferring responsibility to a divine being (Jang & Johnson, 2017, pp. 74–86).

This research project was a longitudinal evaluation of the effects of an 8-week bible-based program called *The Prisoner's Journey* (TPJ) on offenders' attitudes and conduct. As a project of Prison Fellowship International (PFI), TPJ has been used in more than 40 countries around the world. We evaluated the program's use in Colombia and South Africa, two countries that have a long history of operating TPJ programs in prisons. While the project was primarily quantitative, we also conducted qualitative interviews, both before and after participation in TPJ, in order to assess changes in program participants' attitudes and sense of active responsibility. Additionally, interviews and surveys were conducted in prisons without a PFI presence, to determine whether the religious speech among offenders before TPJ participation was affected by PFI's presence in the prison.

Method and Context

The Prisoner's Journey (TPJ) is a Protestant (evangelical) bible study curriculum designed by Prison Fellowship International (PFI) to “transform the lives of prisoners, from the inside out, by introducing them to a restorative relationship with the person of Jesus” (Prison Fellowship International, 2021). The course is facilitated either by volunteers from local churches or offenders who have been trained by PFI. Groups are limited to 10 to 12 offenders and feature videos (where possible) of former offenders addressing the themes of the course. Thematically, the course centers on three questions about the life of Jesus: who is he, why did he come, and what does it mean to follow him (Prison Fellowship International, 2019)? Group leaders are instructed to emphasize the offender’s personal responsibility for ‘sin,’ which includes both external wrongdoing and internal thoughts and attitudes.

The course emphasizes that the “reason there’s something wrong with the world is because there’s something wrong with us” (Prison Fellowship International, 2019). This narrative of sin and responsibility intensifies the offender’s sense of wrongdoing and anticipates the “solution” that TPJ offers in highlighting the forgiving grace of Jesus. Though this message of forgiveness acknowledges offenders’ need for systems of support and care, it underscores individual responsibility: The “invitation” to follow Jesus emphasizes the “cost of commitment to Christ,” which “involves surrender of our lives into God’s hands” and “obedience.” Not surprisingly, those who complete the program are invited to participate in whatever ongoing discipleship programs the local PFI ministry runs.

Our research evaluated the program’s effects on offender attitudes and identity in prisons in Colombia and South Africa, from 2018 to 2019. Surveys were administered to treatment and control groups. Both groups were asked to participate in three surveys: a pretest (before TPJ started), a posttest (after TPJ ended), and a follow-up (10–12 months after the posttest). Recruitment for TPJ began with inviting offenders to a promotional event, where they watched a short video and then were asked to enroll in the eight-session course. Every offender who signed up for TPJ was also invited to participate in our study. Those who agreed completed a pretest survey. Interviews were then conducted with randomly-selected offenders from this group. The interviews were recorded, and then transcribed (except in a few instances where prison limitations required field notes). In Colombia, interviews were conducted with a translator present, and audio files were subsequently reviewed for accuracy. In South Africa, offenders had sufficient facility with English that interviews were conducted without a translator. The study is limited by attrition: Our sample size decreased on every visit, owing to offender releases and movement between prisons. We conducted a pretest interview with a total of 73 male offenders—41 in Colombia (13 in TPJ prison and 28 in non-TPJ prison) and 32 in South Africa (29 in TPJ prisons and 3 in non-TPJ prison), and about a quarter (18) of them were reinterviewed after the program was completed (posttest).¹ In Colombia, four posttest interviews happened in each of the TPJ and non-TPJ prisons; in South Africa, we did 10 posttest interviews in TPJ prisons, while we were not able to conduct posttest interviews in our control. About 10 to 12 months

later, a final, follow-up interview was conducted with only seven TPJ graduates: one in Colombia and six in South Africa. While access limitations meant we received socioeconomic data for only 51 of our 73 participants from correctional officials, Table 1 indicates that the characteristics of our participants across both countries were similar.

Our analysis of the interview data aimed at answering whether religious belief or practice are conducive to active responsibility-taking. We coded interviews according to a narrative approach, which enabled us to evaluate offenders' responses to direct questions within the context of their personal story. Initial coding revealed a natural beginning, middle, and end to offenders' stories that further warranted this methodology (Merriam & Tiswell, 2016). The narrative approach allows for their experiences to be valorized while allowing events to be chronologically connected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were highly focused and directed toward assessing the offender's sense of responsibility and blame, their feelings about prison life, their experience of TPJ (if applicable), and their attitudes toward themselves and their futures. Offenders were asked how long they had been incarcerated, and responses often included personal accounts of sentencing, time incarcerated, transfers between institutions, and conditions of the institutions. They were asked why bad or unfortunate things happened in their life. While they were asked about blame and responsibility, they were not asked about their offense (though many offenders volunteered details). The offenders' plotlines largely harmonized: There was life before prison, life presently in prison, and an expected life after and outside of prison. Though interviews were short, most offenders provided meaningful accounts of personal failure, betrayal, hope, and change. These commonalities provided a scaffolding from which to analyze themes such as religiosity, blame-taking, responsibility-taking, and expectations for the future shown by: (a) whether offenders expected to re-offend; (b) personal changes to character; and (c) plans to re-enter society, take care of family, and pursue gainful employment.

The data were analyzed with Nvivo software where nodes, or themes, were created using a combination of in vivo and values coding. Some of the codes were straightforward: Whether offenders took all of the blame for their incarceration, or whether another agent (God or a person) shared responsibility. Other codes were derived from their perceived values—whether religious, spiritual, or from the street. Our analysis also considered whether the offenders' narratives were derived from religious commitment. Religious commitment included self-reported conversion, attendance, prayer, reading sacred text, discipleship, and doctrinal statements. We identified 'highly religious' people based on their attendance at religious services, personal devotional practices, and use of explicitly religious imagery ("father God"), language, and themes in response to questions unrelated to religion. Those who self-identified as religious, but who did not make explicit use of religious imagery or devotional practices were coded as "weakly religious." Finally, we coded based on offenders' response to the likelihood they would reoffend.

South Africa and Colombia are both intensely religious countries. According to the Association of Religion Data Archives (2015), about 80% of the South African

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Sociodemographic Variables.

Variable	Treatment (TPJ) group (n=30)			Control group (n=21)		
	Obs./freq.	Mean/%	S.D.	Obs./freq.	Mean/%	S.D.
Age	20	34.400	6.030	19	39.105	14.697
Violent offense	16	0.438	0.512	19	0.263	0.452
Property offense	15	0.467*	0.516	19	0.105*	0.315
Sex offense	15	0.333	0.488	19	0.158	0.375
Drug offense	16	0.688*	0.479	19	0.316*	0.478
Other offense	11	0.273	0.467	19	0.158	0.375
Education						
Primary school	4	21.1%		5	26.3%	
Secondary school	10	52.6%		12	63.2%	
Technical degree	3	15.8%		0	0.0%	
Higher education	3	15.8%		2	10.5%	
Total	20	105.3%		19	100.0%	
Marital status						
Single	12	60.0%		10	52.6%	
Married	2	10.0%		4	21.1%	
Cohabitation	4	20.0%		5	26.3%	
Divorced/Separated	1	5.0%		0	0.0%	
Widowed	1	5.0%		0	0.0%	
Total	20	100.0%		19	100.0%	
Religion						
Protestant	17	63.0%		7	25.9%	
Catholic	5	18.5%		10	37.0%	
Muslim	2	7.4%		0	0.0%	
Other religion	2	7.4%		1	3.7%	
No religion	1	3.7%		0	0.0%	
Total	27	100.0%		18	66.7%	

Note. The treatment and control group inmates were not statistically different in sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., age, education, marital status, and religion) but were different in current offense: specifically, the treatment group interviewees were more likely to be property and drug offenders than their control group counterparts.

* $p < .05$.

population belong to a Christian religion. However, only 6% of the country is Catholic, while other Christian believers are either Pentecostals, Protestants, or an unknown or syncretic Christian religion. About 5% to 10% of the country are adherents of Islam, Hinduism, African traditional religion, and other non-Christian religions, whereas about 10% had no religious affiliation. Colombia, by contrast, is 88% Catholic. 7% are Pentecostals, Protestants or other Christian religions, and the rest of the country either belongs to other religions or are non-religious (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2015).

Table 2. Summary Statistics of Male Participants.

Distribution of prisoners South Africa	Full responsibility-taking (pre-TPJ)	Change in responsibility-taking (post-TPJ)
Treatment prisons (<i>n</i> =29 pre; <i>n</i> =9 post)		
Highly religious	14 of 20 (70%)	6 of 8 (75%)=No Change (Full RT Pre-TPJ to Full Post-TPJ) 1 of 8 (13%)=No Change (No RT Pre-TPJ to No Post-TPJ) 1 of 8 (13%)=No RT Pre-TPJ to Full Post-TPJ
Weakly religious	1 of 6 (17%)	1 of 1 (100%)=Moderate RT Pre-TPJ to Full Post TPJ
Not religious	3 of 3 (100%)	
Control prison (<i>n</i> =3)		
Highly religious	2 of 2 (100%)	N/A
Weakly religious	1 of 1 (33%)	N/A
Distribution of prisoners Columbia		
Treatment prison (<i>n</i> =13; <i>n</i> =5 post)		
Highly religious	10 of 11 (91%)	2 of 5 (40%)=No RT or Moderate RT Pre-TPJ to Full Post TPJ 2 of 5 (40%)=No Change (Full RT Pre-TPJ to Full Post-TPJ) 1 of 5 (20%)=No Change (Moderate RT Pre-TPJ and Post-TPJ)
Weakly religious	2 of 2 (100%)	N/A
Control prison (<i>n</i> =28)		
Highly religious	12 of 14 (86%)	N/A
Weakly religious	6 of 12 (50%)	N/A
Not religious	1 of 2 (50%)	N/A

Such widespread background religiosity is valuable for helping understand the role short-term programs like TPJ have on offenders' identity and attitudes. Research indicates that the prosocial effects of religious beliefs are indexed to religious practice, rather than simply verbal affiliation. In Colombia, our analysis revealed that the treatment (TPJ) and control (non-TPJ) groups were not significantly different in background variables except for religious affiliation: Specifically, the treatment group participants were more likely than their control group counterparts to be Protestant (36.9% vs. 23.3%) and less likely to be Catholic (51.3% vs. 65.6%). In addition, TPJ participants were more likely to say that they had "no religion" than the non-participants. Not surprisingly, our research indicated increased religiosity among TPJ participants, especially in Colombia. If religion has criminogenic effects, then we would expect there to be a correlation between religious affiliation and diminished senses of responsibility. Yet that is the inverse of what our interview data disclosed. While responsibility-taking was high among all believers who self-reported or described themselves as very religious, in some cases participation in TPJ increased offenders' responsibility-taking.

Unsurprisingly, offenders at the TPJ prison in Colombia were far more uniform in their religious language at the outset of our study than those in the TPJ prison in South Africa. Table 2 shows that of the 13 offenders interviewed before TPJ commenced in

the Colombia treatment prison, 12 (92.3%) admitted to wrongdoing and included a reference to some sort of Christian faith commitment. In the initial pre-TPJ interviews in South Africa, 18 of 29 (62%) offenders accepted unequivocal blame for the alleged crime committed. Among them, the religious identities of the offenders included 13 Christians, one Buddhist, one who claimed to worship ancestors, and three that claimed no religion. Only 6 among the 20 highly religious deflected blame or blamed someone else. The control prison in Colombia had no shortage of offenders willing to take responsibility for their crime (19 of 28 [67.9%]). While this prison had the fewest references to personal faith, responsibility-taking correlated with those references.

Despite the differences in religiosity and other cultural differences, with some exceptions, offenders across our study offered similar narratives about their sense of responsibility, blame, and about the way their religious commitments intersect with them. In many cases, offenders who invoked divine action as part of their explanation for being in prison framed their experience comparatively—either being “in prison or dead” was a common motif. Yet while such a retrospective assessment of the relative benefits of being in prison were common among highly religious offenders, they were almost invariably expressed in tandem with unmitigated expressions of responsibility for wrongs. Second, highly religious offenders pointed toward the opportunity to expand their religious knowledge and religious practices (reading the Bible, praying, etc.) that prison offered them as a basis for gratitude for being in prison. This was especially true of offenders in the TPJ prisons. At the same time, in a few cases TPJ intensified—rather than diminished—participants’ responsibility-taking.

Religiosity and Responsibility Within Control (Non-TPJ) Prisons

Complicated Narratives of Responsibility

Offenders in both the Colombian and South African prisons carefully parsed the sources of their own criminal conduct, enabling them to mitigate wrongdoing when appropriate without disclaiming responsibility. For instance, one offender in our control prison in Colombia was emphatic that bad choices have consequences and forthrightly claimed responsibility for his offense. Yet he was highly cognizant that his reasons for offending were intertwined with hardship he had experienced:

I’m very conscious of the fact that when you do bad things, they have consequences. But because of poverty and my family’s financial situation, I agreed to do the things that brought me here.. So, I think about that a lot and I regret it.

The offender simultaneously recognizes that external conditions made him vulnerable to criminal conduct, but also sees his time in prison through the lens of “payback” for his wrongful conduct. Acknowledging the badness of his circumstances does not preclude this offender from taking fine-grained, targeted responsibility for his wrongdoing. In response to whether he blames someone, the offender was unequivocal: “I take

responsibility for my actions. Like I said, you know that bad things can bring bad consequences, so I am the one who is responsible, who is guilty, for what I am going through.” Our subsequent interview confirmed the offender’s sense of responsibility, and further clarified how carefully specified it was. While he acknowledges that he was plotting theft, the offender also argues that he was framed:

I accept my responsibility. I know I was going to do something bad. If I could tell you everything, you’d understand, but it’s a very long story. But I’m who’s responsible, I recognize my mistakes. But, what we’re actually paying for in here isn’t true. Because they never caught us with weapons.

This pattern of accepting responsibility despite feeling unjustly convicted was repeated frequently in our interviews. Another Colombian offender freely accepted responsibility, suggesting that the bad things (including prison) he had suffered were “the consequences of [his] deeds and actions.” Yet when asked how likely he thought it was that he would reoffend, the offender asserted that he was not guilty:

Unfortunately, and I can say this because there is a God who sees everything, that I didn’t commit a crime. I just took the weapon to give it back and then the police came, and I tossed it and that was it. I had it for probably less than a minute in my hand. I was going to get a cab to take it back to the owner. And now I’m unfortunately paying for having this weapon that I didn’t carry. But they charged me as if it were mine and for an attempted homicide that I didn’t do. So, I don’t think I’ll go back to committing crime because I was a victim of the consequences of being on the street.

Another offender claimed he was convicted of conspiracy when he was trying to buy drugs. On the one side, he denounced his criminal conviction:

Sometimes I go to bed and I think wow, there are people in here who are guilty and who really deserve to be in here. And here I am, I’ve lost my family and everything and I don’t feel like I’m guilty. I mean, I didn’t do anything. I didn’t do anything on the outside to deserve this.

On the other side, the offender attributed the bad things he had suffered to his vices, and prescinded from blaming anyone besides himself:

Interviewer: Do you blame anyone, or anything, for these bad things?

Interviewee: No, nobody. The drugs. It happened because I was buying drugs.

Other offenders were equally conscious that their criminal conduct was a “last resort.”

Well, I don’t consider myself a bad person. I mean, of course I have made some mistakes. And you have to pay for those. So right now, I’m paying for the mistakes I made on the outside. . . I did what I had to do to take care of my wife and daughter. It’s so hard to get a job.

Here the offender's acceptance of responsibility combines with his acknowledgment of the exigencies of his financial situation, which enables him to tell a mitigating story about his character.

Divine Action and Responsibility

While offenders in the control environment offered complex narratives of their personal responsibility, highly religious people often invoked God in ways that were compatible with responsibility-taking. In many such cases, invocations of God were combined with an emphasis on repayment. In other cases, they compared imprisonment to being dead in order to explain why they thought God had brought them to prison. Offenders who did seem to invoke religious language or pseudo-religious concepts like "destiny" to defer responsibility were, intriguingly, also likely to disavow any formal religious practices even while they affirmed their belief in God.

For instance, one offender framed his time in prison as an amalgam of retribution for his crimes and as a slightly-less bad outcome because of his good deeds, effectively invoking something close to 'karma' to explain why he was in prison.

Why have [bad things] happened? I mean, it's like they say, you always pay for the bad things that you do. You know the criminal groups don't do any good. But there were times that I did good things. So, God must have wanted it that way. I believe a lot in God. I'm not a member of any religion and when I was on the outside I didn't go to church, but I do believe in God . . . I guess it was my destiny.

This offender simultaneously stresses that he believed in God and prays, which are marks of being highly religious. But the offender also explicitly rejects membership in a religion, and did not report attending any services of any kind (he identified as Jehovah's Witness). Even while his invocation of "destiny" here might seem like a way of deferring responsibility, the offender also unequivocally blamed himself exclusively for his offense: "I don't blame anyone. Who could I blame? I blame myself."

Another offender who was weakly religious used similar "destiny" talk and a narrative about the obstacles he faced to obscure his responsibility. While the offender was Catholic, he also said he was "very attracted to other religions," naming Buddhism and Islam, as he found in them "many values that are lacking in [his] religion." This offender used destiny language to frame his time in prison as simply one more instance of the suffering he had to endure:

I used to really think that it was to make me stronger. To prepare me mentally for something that was coming. . . But now, I don't know.

His uncertainty about why the bad things happened was accompanied by a lack of surety about whether he would reoffend upon release. While the offender acknowledged his desire to change his life, he was also "not sure about" whether he would desist. Beneath these twin uncertainties lay a narrative about destiny, which was forged out of the suffering the offender had been subjected to.

And it's as if it were destined from my childhood that I would end up here. Since my childhood I had to live through situations, like I told you, that are similar to this. I lived as a prisoner in my aunt's house. All I had, along with my cousins, was what she gave us. My only contact with the outside world was a window and the bars on it. I had to learn to live with a lot of things that I have to live with now. I had to accept that I had no rights. . . And all of that brought me here.

Another offender who had been weakly religious outside of prison also invoked destiny in a way that diminished agency over his future. In answering why bad things happened to him, the offender simultaneously blamed himself while noting that his circumstances had affected him:

Because I was hardheaded, I didn't listen to my mom's advice. I never knew my Dad, so maybe that affected me too.

Yet while the offender acknowledges his own "hardheadedness" and did not blame anyone else, he also expressed ambivalence about his ability to control himself in the future—in part because of his view of divine action. When asked why he wanted a change in his life, the offender responded:

Sometimes you say you want to change, but destiny has something else for you. Maybe because of your past or something like that. I had a really bad past. So sometimes you say you want to change, but then the dice don't fall that way. So, it's just whatever God wants and that's it.

In this case, again, the offender's religiosity is complicated: He was raised Catholic, but said that he had not been to church since confirmation. At the same time, he said he was attending mass regularly. However, unlike many other highly religious offenders, he also did not employ religious language or imagery when asked about his purpose or his life in prison.

The most explicit endorsement of "destiny" as an explanation for why bad things happened was accompanied by the most emphatic avowal of responsibility-taking: On the one side, the offender said that bad things happened because:

It was my destiny. It's all part of life. Sometimes we experience happiness and likewise we experience bad things and death which is unfortunately inevitable.

On the other side, the offender declined to blame anyone else and said that he turned himself in: "No, no, no. For starters I wasn't caught, I turned myself in, and recognized that I was guilty. And the bad things that have happened to me, are just my destiny catching up to me." When asked how he would describe himself as a person, the offender emphasized, "I am very responsible. I like responsibility." The offender was weakly religious and attributed his Catholic adherence to his parents:

I think they [all religions] are basically the same. They all talk about God. . . So you're Catholic because you go to a Catholic church because your mother told you to.

Another Colombian offender who was religious had moved beyond the language of destiny, toward taking more direct responsibility and wrapping it within a payback narrative:

At first, I thought it was just destiny. Things that just happened. And now I believe that these things happen because of the way you live. And that's something that I chose. And now I want an opportunity, a change in my life, a new way to do things, I can't because I have to pay for what I was doing before. I have to pay for what I did. Many of us here are asking for an opportunity to change our lives.

Unlike the others we talked to, this offender pits “destiny” against taking personal responsibility for one’s wrongs. The offender was highly religious: while he had been Catholic but said that he had “started learning that the Bible says some things aren’t Catholic,” and was now somewhere between a Protestant and Catholic Christian.

While some offenders invoked “destiny” as an explanation for bad things in a way that inhibited taking active responsibility for their offenses, even such explanations were still frequently accompanied by active responsibility-taking for offenses. Those few offenders who invoked destiny to explain their conduct tended to wrap it within a narrative of payback or to explain the contingency of their circumstances—which, in two cases, meant lowered confidence about whether they would desist from crime or not. With one exception, those who invoked destiny as an explanation were weakly religious—and one person who claimed to be learning more about his religion said, retrospectively, that he had departed from the language of “destiny.”

Even within the control environment, though, high religiosity correlated strongly with responsibility-taking. Offenders could simultaneously acknowledge their wrongdoing and invoke divine action as an explanation for the bad things that had happened to them. The latter enabled offenders to renarrate their time in prison as a benefit to them, both for the time it gave them to pursue their religious convictions and because it is better than the alternative of being dead.

For instance, one highly religious offender who had grown up in a Pentecostal church and was attending Catholic Mass (because there were no other options in terms of church services offered) not only attributed his being in prison to God, but framed it comparatively and as a beneficial opportunity for growth.

Because, like the Christian teaching, there are two paths, a good one and a bad one, and we chose to take the bad one and do bad. And so, we end up here, because we made mistakes. But we also thank God that we ended up here and aren't dead, you know. And we thank God for this experience that should change us—change us for the better.

While the offender takes responsibility in terms of his ‘choosing’ the wrong path, he acknowledges that his choice might have caused his death.²

Two extremely religious offenders also suggested God had a purpose in bringing them to prison—but in ways that intensified their sense of responsibility, rather than diminishing it. One offender narrowly targeted his sense of responsibility, suggesting his conviction was not *fully* right: “There were parts of it that were right and parts that were wrong.” Yet rather than dissolve responsibility, the offender framed his conviction through a narrative of payback—in which the ultimate person to be paid back is God.

Well, I think father God has a purpose for me. So, it’s all related to him. I let myself get carried away doing bad things, and now I’m here paying for it before man. But the person you really have to settle with is our Lord God.

While the offender’s religiosity might have contributed to diminished responsibility-taking, in this context it heightens it: Paradoxically, paying for his wrong requires not only doing so “before man,” but before God.

Another offender ascribed his being in prison to God having a purpose for his life, even though he also protested repeatedly that he was imprisoned unjustly.

Because God has a purpose for you in life. And I guess so. But I’m 68 years old. I’ve tried to work for my family and to teach them morals and give them an education. [inaudible] It’s very hard, very hard.

The offender desires the opportunity to learn “to value life” and “to obey God more” in order to specify the “purpose” God might have for him. This reclamation of his agency seems especially important to him, given the pervasive disempowerment that he expresses:

Most of the prisoners are good people, but you still feel mistreated in here. You can’t trust justice here. If you have money that’s one thing, but if not, you have no way of defending yourself. [inaudible] I’m disappointed in the Colombian legal system.

Rather than neglecting responsibility-taking, the offender attempts to use the time to undertake character-formation, while deferring restitution to God.

I’m learning spiritually, learning to overcome resentment and so many things. [inaudible]. God will punish who needs to be punished, I don’t have to hang my head low.

In sum, while the religiosity of the offenders we spoke to in our control prison is generally high, there were few indications of employing religious imagery or explanations in order to avoid responsibility-taking. Those who were highly religious almost invariably took full responsibility for their offenses. In many cases, that was cloaked within a ‘payback’ narrative—which in some cases was heightened by invoking God as the ultimate source of accountability. While five offenders invoked the language of “destiny,” in most cases it did not preclude responsibility-taking. In the two cases where it

might do so, the offenders claimed belief in God—but also lacked key marks of being highly religious.

Religion, Responsibility, and Agency in TPJ Prisons

Nearly all the themes present within interviews the control prison interviews were present in TPJ prisons as well. While participants in the TPJ program used the same explanations for their conduct as any other offenders, some participants registered distinct changes in how they spoke about their responsibility after completing the program. While the same complicated narratives about offender responsibility and circumstances were employed, some inmates renarrated their offenses in terms that accentuated their *religious* or *spiritual* failures as a source of their criminal misconduct, thus heightening their responsibility for wrongdoing by transcendentalizing it. Additionally, offenders in the TPJ environment never invoked “destiny” at all, much less as a means of deferring responsibility. While these themes were pervasive among highly religious individuals from the first interview, participation in TPJ also seems to have shifted how a few offenders thought and spoke about their responsibility.

For instance, one offender in Colombia who was highly religious outside prison invoked God-talk to such a degree that it left his own responsibility for his offense ambiguous. Before going through TPJ, the offender underscored how his weakened relationship with God was the source of his crime.

Glory be to God I already knew God from when I was on the outside. And when I got a little distant from God, that’s when I slipped and fell and that’s why I’m here.³

The offender did not specify *how* his getting distant from God contributed to his offending behavior. In fact, his description of how he ended up in prison came near to framing himself as a victim of his own good character. When asked about what sort of person he thought he was, the offender volunteered this:

I like to serve, to help, to serve people. . . Someone was going to kill me; a young man was going to kill me. Because he was really drunk, and he was going to kill me. . . And another man stepped up to defend me. . . And I felt, man, so grateful. So grateful to him, like, “Man I owe this guy my life.” And because of him, I’m in here. He got me mixed up in a situation. . . he asked me to [transport] something for him and they caught me and that’s why I’m here.

Still, the offender did not disavow responsibility in the first interview—even if it was muted. After starting by seeming to disavow responsibility by claiming that these are “just things that happen,” his subsequent answers indicated that he generalized his guilt and responsibility through something like a doctrine of sin, rather than tying it specifically to the particular act for which he was convicted.

Interviewee: I wasn’t a part of a gang and never got into trouble. Nothing. These are just things that happen.

Interviewer: Why do you think they happen? And particularly what brought you here.

Interviewee: Being here. . . I ask myself that. And I think about something a buddy told me. He said, "They say there are innocent people. . . in [this prison], doing time. But none of us are innocent. None of us."

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Interviewee: Because at some point I did something I shouldn't do. Maybe it was a while back, maybe years ago, but I did something. And life didn't 'charge' me for it then. . . life doesn't 'charge' you until it's your time. Not when I did it, not in the act.

Interviewer: So, would you say that you are in here at your own fault or someone else's?

Interviewee: It's the same. I agree with what that guy said, that none of us are innocent. We have all made mistakes. It's like a sin. A sin can be very small or very big, but the word is *sin*. Big or small? No. . . sin!

After participating in TPJ, the offender became forthright about his responsibility, in such a way that localizes it to the action he committed. Even though he was highly religious at the outset, his post-TPJ interview emphasizes that his offense was his "own doing" in a new way:

Interviewee: They're very arrogant. Very arrogant. But I also know that I made a mistake and these are the consequences of my mistake.

Interviewer: Do you feel any anger towards anyone that may have had something to do with you coming to prison? Or from your past?

Interviewee: No, I don't feel anger. . . because it's my own doing. And where I am now is paying for the mistake that I made. And God has healed my heart and that keeps me from having enemies or anger towards anyone. God has healed that part of me.

The offender's increased sensitivity to his responsibility for wrongdoing was not unique in interviews with participants in TPJ, even if they were (like him) already Christians at the outset. One offender in Colombia, for instance, in his first interview claimed repeatedly that he had been incarcerated without cause. When asked about the bad things that happened to him, he responded:

I can't understand how I ended up in a place like this. I'm paying for something that I didn't do.

This was a recurring theme within the interview. The interviewee was attending Protestant church services on his cellblock, even though he had not gone to church

outside. While the offender expressed his desire to get to know God better while in prison, he also made few references to God throughout our interview. He described his life in prison with something like resignation: “Life in here is hard. But you just have to deal with it, since you’re in here.” Additionally, the offender says he is fully confident that he would not return to prison—but makes no reference to God or other religious reasons. Instead, the offender claimed again that he was wrongfully imprisoned:

I’m here because of a girl. And she claimed that I abused her. . .[unintelligible] but I didn’t do it.

The subsequent interview after the offender’s participation with TPJ was startling for its differences. Most strikingly, the offender’s sense of injustice at being incarcerated was almost fully displaced by an effusive sense that his time in prison had been good for him—a gratitude that was pervaded by his growing religious vitality. When we asked how life had been since our first interview—our first question—the offender’s answer was both optimistic and thoroughly religious: “Good, good, thanks be to God. Overcoming all problems and honestly, on the outside I didn’t know God, but in here I’ve had the opportunity [to get to know God].”

The offender returned to this theme later in the interview, after we asked when the changes that he asserted were underway had started: “Most people don’t want to come to prison,” he said, “but I’m almost thankful to God that he sent me to prison because this is the place where I came to know God and drawn close to the church.” While the offender pointed to religious sources for his gratitude, he also touted that he is improving his life in other arenas, including school:

It’s another thing that I’ve had an opportunity to do here in prison, which is to go to school. I didn’t have that opportunity on the outside. Or I guess I didn’t want to. I did have the opportunity, but I didn’t want to. But now that I’m here, I’m studying and that’s another change that I’ve made. And it’s evident to my daughters on Whatsapp, I try to chat with them and ask them if they can understand what I am writing and they say that yes, they can understand what I write. And of course, I have a way to go, but I have learned a lot already.

Moreover, the offender never says that he has been incarcerated unjustly, or even hints that he was not responsible. Instead, when asked how confident he is that he will not return to prison, the offender *downgrades* his confidence from 100% to 80%, and offers an explanation that simultaneously acknowledges the limits of his own agency and hints that he shares some responsibility for his conviction:

People always say, man, I’m not going to return. But you can’t control what’s going to happen when you’re back out on the streets. You know, the streets are full of problems. And in order to defend yourself you might do something crazy and end up in here again. So, you can’t ever say, “I won’t return.” So, if you say, “I won’t be back, then you’re lying.” On the outside you’re not free, you’re never fully free from the cemetery, the

hospital or jail. I never thought I'd be in a place like this, and I'm here for something stupid. . . and I'm serving a sentence of 128 months. I never could have imagined that.

While the responsibility-taking is not overt, the offender also expanded the range of wrongs he committed to include non-criminal conduct toward his family:

Interviewer: What kinds of challenges have you overcome [since we last spoke]?

Interviewee: On the outside, honestly, I was really acting poorly, treating my family poorly, I was really quite lost. And now in here I've learned to really appreciate my family.

The offender's expanded sense of responsibility is also intertwined with reclaiming agency. The offender points to his family's acknowledgment of minor transformations like his language, and major changes like studying, as evidence of the way he is changing. On his view, these changes are directly attributable to his newfound religious commitments.

They can even tell from our phone calls now, because I used speak in really vulgar language and use a lot of the 'Paisa' slang. And they tell me, "Wow, you've really changed. They know I'm going to church and they say, "that's great!" And Now when I call my mom she'll ask, "Son, are you going to church?" And I'll tell her, "Yes mom, of course." So, she can tell too. She's seen the change.

Another offender in South Africa also dropped claims of being unjustly incarcerated and renarrated his time in prison as a benefit after he participated in TPJ. This offender had been raised religious, but volunteered that he had quit going to church and expressed ambivalence about his relationship with God. When asked about his religious commitments now, he responded, "Sometimes I believe in God. Sometimes I have doubts." The offender did at the outset express his interest in change, which he emphasized required forgiveness—and specifically "forgiving yourself before you forgive others." At the same time, the offender asserted that he had been framed, volunteering that he had been accused of raping his spouse by a third party: "Yeah, I was dating someone, and someone threatened me, saying I raped [my girlfriend.]" The offender's assertion of innocence for his conviction is not unmitigated: He acknowledged both that he would drink and abuse his girlfriend. Yet despite this, the offender adopted a narrative in which he was a victim of a false accusation.

This posture disappeared in subsequent conversations, after the offender participated in TPJ. While the offender retains the emphasis on 'forgiving and forgetting' his past that had been present in our first interview, he also takes a dramatically different stance toward his prior wrong. When asked about what sort of person he is, the offender volunteers that he *had* in fact raped his wife, and that he was not framed by someone at work:

Me? I was a man who liked to drink each and every day while I was still working. I was working at bodyguard. Since then, I had the anger, but I know how to control it, that anger. But, when I'm a drunken man, I used to beat my wife, stuff like that.

When she refuses, if I want to sleep with her, she refuses, she say, “No, no, no!” I was used to sleep with her with full force. That means it’s a rape, it’s a crime. Then, after she arrested me, I said what rape?

Then, I already confess in court. I say, “Okay, I did that because of what? I was drunk.” I take the responsibility for myself, what I did.

Even more remarkably, the offender returns to the theme when invited to share any final thoughts with us. After insisting that he is “not that guy who commits crime and do stuff like that,” he pivots and reiterates his culpability for his crime and underscores his hopes for being forgiven by her:

When I commit this crime, I get arrested for rape. And, I was drunk. And, I admit what I did. And, I’m sorry to that person I did to him. My wish is him to forgive me. That is my wish. If she forgives me, then I will be much better than I am, because now I used to pray for my family to not offend anyone because of, yes, I did what I did, it was not me, it’s because I was so drunk.⁴

The offender also dropped any ambivalence about his relationship with God, and about why he ended up in prison. Instead, the offender asserted that he know why he is in prison, and tied his transformation to TPJ:

This *Prisoner’s Journey* heals my life, because of, I was something like, sometimes I thought maybe “How is it Jesus? Is He alive?” Or sometimes thinking lot of things until I found this journey, then I believe that Jesus is still alive. And, I thank Him because of why am I here. Now I know why am I here in prison.

While the offender claims he is changing and points to being ‘forgiven’ by God, he also underscores that he is reclaiming his agency in ordinary interactions:

Day after day you see like greeting others, they greet me back. It’s like that heart I was having it, no. That though, I thought maybe people they don’t like me because of I did this and that, no I was wrong. Now, I see people they like me and they understand what am I talking to them.

I already accept everything. So, even if somebody can come to me, maybe want to fight with me, I won’t fight back. No, I won’t fight back.

In our third and final interview with this offender some 15 months after our second, he said that he had been baptized and was attending church regularly in the prison. While the offender did not discuss his rape conviction in that conversation, he repeatedly pointed to alcohol as a reason why he ended up in prison. While the offender takes full responsibility for his actions, he also explains that alcoholism impaired his judgment:

You know sometimes when you’re drunk, you do things that you don’t like and you can’t see them either. But in the morning, they remind you, you forgot everything. When time goes on, you realize that no, I’m not drinking this thing, I’m doing this thing.

b

In fact, his altered relationship with alcohol gives him evidence for his changed life: “I’m attending the church, the 12 Apostles, so I get baptized there and I make the promise that I will never go back to old life. So never drink, the only thing I have left is to quit smoking.”

These themes recurred throughout our interviews with participants in TPJ and offenders who had contact with PFI. One offender in South Africa, for instance, after going through TPJ integrated the idea that prison is a divine benefit into an account of criminogenic activity that gives full due to the challenges of poverty that ex-convicts face. He framed the rightness of his conviction as giving him both the benefits of knowing God and of avoiding death. Yet these themes were accompanied by an affirmation of his personal responsibility *and* its limits:

It is the right thing that they did, if they did not send me here then I would not have known the Word. Maybe I would be dead. So, for me they did right. I was wrong to take things but I did not injure him. It was not my intention, *dit was uit die maag uit* (‘it was out of the stomach’—meaning he was hungry).

Moreover, he pointed toward transformations in speech as evidence for the way in which his life was changing.

If it wasn’t for *The Prisoner’s Journey*, I would again be here at the bomb cell (single cells) by hurting others. But here I am. . . I am no longer involved with gangs and I know how to control myself. If someone is doing wrong by me or is swearing at me, I just tell myself that he can swear, and I walk away and read the Word.

Another offender in Colombia who in our first meeting said he was already attending church every day at Prison Fellowship “morning and evening” emphasized that the progress he was making in changing himself was evident in his use of drugs.

I’ve been going to church, I’ve been praying, I’ve been reading the Bible. I’ve realized that the life that I was living wasn’t good. It’s been about a month since I’ve done drugs. . . and I’m trying to get off the cigarettes, but they have been very hard to quit. So, I feel ready and prepared for a change.

The same offender attributed his sense of purpose on earth to being in prison, combining the comparative claim about “jail or death,” a sense of gratitude for divine action, and the opportunities afforded by prison in a single answer:

Ever since I ended up here, I said it must be because God has something good in store for my life. I don’t know what it is, but I know that when I get out of here, I will have something good on the outside. I’ll have a life, because before this I was lost on the streets in drug addiction. I didn’t work anymore, anything I got I spent on drugs. Towards the end I wouldn’t even go home, I wouldn’t eat just to get drugs. And this is why my mom says, be thankful you ended up in there and not dead. And that’s true. You know, as criminals those are the only things we can expect: jail or death. So, I thank God that I

ended up here and I have learned so much. And hopefully when I get out, I'll have something good on the outside. Work or whatever.

In sum, our conversations with highly-religious offenders indicated a strong willingness to take responsibility for wrongs, while in a few cases participation in TPJ seemed to alter how offenders narrated that responsibility and their time in prison.

Discussion and Conclusion

Several themes emerged from our conversations with offenders in Colombian and South African prisons, which shed additional light on how offenders understand their responsibility for wrongdoing in relationship to their religious beliefs. In the first place, the similarity of narratives across prison environments was striking. Offenders consistently framed prison as a comparative benefit to them, with death as the alternative. Yet in many cases, that comparative benefit was encountered as a grace or mercy—and, for some offenders, contributed to a narrative in which they sought to reform themselves and avoid reoffending. Additionally, offenders were capable of telling sophisticated accounts of the etiology of their criminal behavior, which delicately balanced their own culpability with other factors like gang influence, poverty, hunger, family loss, and so on. Such careful parsing of their own wrongdoing was almost universally accompanied by a recognition that they bore at least partial responsibility. In some cases, offenders disclaimed any responsibility on the grounds of their innocence and wrongful conviction. Yet the clarity and care with which offenders assign blame in such contexts indicates that their ascriptions of divine blessing or benefit for ending up in prison are commensurate with active responsibility-taking.

At the same time, several offenders in the control environment invoked “destiny” to explain why bad things had happened to them. In two cases, the offenders seemed to use such language to defer responsibility for wrongs—while in the other cases, such language was commensurate with responsibility-taking, functioning as the last resort for an explanation of the bad things that had happened to them. Moreover, such language was predominately invoked by those who had nebulous religious commitments: If they believed in God, they either emphasized their lack of adherence to a single religious outlook or limited their religious language throughout our interviews.

The language of ‘destiny’ was not used by anyone in the Prison Fellowship prisons, nor was it used by any unambiguously highly religious offenders. In fact, in some cases participation in TPJ engendered more specific, targeted responsibility-taking which sometimes included rejecting narratives that the offender had been framed. Moreover, such changes were accompanied by reframing prison as a benefit because of the religious opportunities it affords, and by efforts to reclaim agency over habits like language, smoking, and the like. While our study was too limited to show whether such an effect is anything more than marginal, it does supply some reason to challenge the idea that religious beliefs have a criminogenic effect. In cases where offenders markedly increased their religiosity through participation in TPJ, they invariably demonstrated more acute sensitivity to their own culpability for wrongdoing. In some

cases, that sense of responsibility was globalized: While offenders said that they were not responsible for the particular wrong that they had been convicted for, participation in TPJ seems to have made them willing to globalize their sense of responsibility, such that their incarceration is transformed into just punishment for *other*, non-criminal wrongs. This heightened sense of responsibility was commensurate with an energetic interest in reclaiming agency, through taking control of speech or drug use in ways that they perceived to be beneficial to their persons and characters.

This analysis has proceeded on two levels. On one level, offender religiosity was correlated with active responsibility-taking: Offenders who described themselves as highly religious or used religious vocabulary were likely to take active responsibility for past wrongs. Rather than evade responsibility, these offenders offered nuanced accounts of their lives that integrated divine agency, their own culpability, and the unfortunate circumstances in which they had been placed. When highly religious offenders appealed to divine agency to explain why bad things happened to them (including prison), they did so in ways commensurate with personal responsibility for wrongdoing. On a second level, some participants in TPJ took responsibility, not only for their criminal offense but for other perceived wrongs.

Such an outcome should be qualified by considering the contexts in which offenders invoke divine agency. Saradjin and Nubos (2003), for instance, considered clergy sex offenders who used divine sanction to justify their criminal conduct. Topalli et al. (2013) similarly raised worries about the use of religious language to justify wrongdoing among street criminals. However, their research, we argue, provided evidence of how religion was used for personal gain (including cognitive benefit), rather than religion having a criminogenic effect. Stated differently, they studied extrinsic religiosity, whereas our study focused on intrinsic religiosity (Allport & Ross, 1967, pp. 432–443). In prospective contexts, where offenders are actively engaged in wrongdoing, religious beliefs might be used to neutralize consciences (Sykes & Matza, 1957, pp. 664–670). But in prison contexts, where convictions have occurred, such beliefs are transformed in ways that do not *alleviate* consciences but *heighten* their sensitivity.

Furthermore, by transcendentalizing the source of accountability and accepting a narrative of forgiveness, offenders are able to reframe their experiences in prison as an opportunity to change their identity through gaining new religious knowledge and undertaking new religious practices—and in so doing, to exercise their agency by modifying their speech, avoiding drugs, not fighting back when insulted, and so on. In this process of transcendentalizing, an offender assumes responsibility for crimes he or she committed and comes to see himself or herself as accountable to a transcendent authority, whether God, the Divine, or a higher power. As one offender strikingly put it, “Now I’m here paying for it before man. But the person you really have to settle with is our Lord God.” Being a relational virtue, transcendent accountability is likely to foster virtuous behaviors of the offender as well as reduce his or her chance of engaging in illegal acts. Thus, a religion-promoted sense of accountability is likely to reform offenders rather than simply having deterrent effect on their misconduct in prison, so they can become virtuous members of the community upon release.

While further research into the question is needed, bible study and other small-group curricula seem apt for intensifying participants' sense of responsibility, even for those who already identify as religious and participate in communal worship. By inviting offenders to hear stories of individuals who took responsibility for their wrongs and by encouraging them to reflect on the fact that they have a choice to either follow Jesus (and so, by implication, change) or not, *TPJ* emphasizes participants' agency and accentuates an individual's responsibility for wrongdoing: As it puts it, the "reason there's something wrong with the world is because there's something wrong with us." While further research is needed into the question, we speculate that programs like *TPJ* induce stronger senses of responsibility-taking through inviting individuals to reflect on their wrongful attitudes and acts, which may or may not be tied to their convictions, and in that way effectively function as Protestant group confessionals. Thus, *TPJ* and programs like it, shift the emphases of offenders' lived religious commitments in ways that are conducive to their responsibility-taking.

It is important to note this study's limitations. In the first place, our sample size is limited due to difficulties gaining access to correctional facilities, and we experienced significant attrition over the course of the study. Moreover, access limitations meant that study participants were selected based on the speed with which they completed their surveys, rather than at random.⁵ Such a methodology might mean our sample is, in general, better educated than the average offender. Finally, our reliance on translators in Colombia mediated our understanding of offenders' responses and limited our capacity for follow-up questions that were responsive to the subtleties of offenders' answers, though these subtleties were very clear within the transcripts. While these limitations should be kept in mind, they do not materially affect the study's arguments or analysis.

In conclusion, this study pushes back against the idea that offenders who invoke religious imagery are in danger of becoming "passive" in their efforts to desist from further criminal activity. Intensifying religious commitment and practice was commensurate with an increase in active responsibility-taking. Asserting transcendent accountability for their wrongs in order to help themselves both find forgiveness and undertake active steps to reform conduct can have a beneficial effect for some inmates. Whether that benefit arises directly from *TPJ* itself, or from the broader participation in the Prison Fellowship International community this study does not indicate. Thus, the question of relative contributions of participating in *TPJ* program versus the PFI community to enhance an offender's responsibility-taking remains a topic for further research. Additionally, many participants in *TPJ* were religious at the outset, including those who insisted that they had "already changed" prior to the study occurring." Those qualifications aside, this research indicates that *The Prisoner's Journey* tends to have a rehabilitative effect on program participants.


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ORCID iDs

Matthew Lee Anderson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5291-6649>

Jason J. Burt  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2747-1764>

Sung Joon Jang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2228-158X>

Notes

1. Access limitations prevented us from interviewing more male offenders in a control environment in South Africa. We also interviewed 21 female offenders in a control environment, but opted to not include that data in our analysis because of the additional complications doing so would present.
2. While the comparison to death was prevalent among highly religious offenders, it was not exclusive to them.
3. Multiple offenders noted that church attendance ended when either criminal conduct or drug use began.
4. The confused pronouns here are a feature of the offender's limited English. It is clear from the context to whom the offender is referring.
5. For example, despite arriving early in the morning with appropriate documentation, we often had to wait for 2 to 3 hours before a regional superintendent would approve our entry. In such an environment, random assignment was simply not possible.

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