

Does Involvement in Religion Help Prisoners Adjust to Prison?

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INTRODUCTION

Although both religion and the prison have been subjected to considerable study, very little research has been done on religion within the prison. Most writings on the topic are merely

anecdotal descriptions of personal experiences of former chaplains and inmates. The few scientific evaluations of religion in prison have not portrayed religion as a promising form of correctional treatment (Johnson, 1984).

It is perhaps surprising that religion in prison has received so little attention from the scientific community. After all, prisons in this country were first founded by religious leaders who wanted to reform the lawbreaker. Even today, religious programming is easily the most common and pervasive form of correctional rehabilitation available to prisoners. Courts, for their part, have seen the practice of religion as one of the basic rights retained by the confined. In a practical sense, religion is a central aspect of the modern prison system.

There is also a fascinating contrast between religion and prison. The prison is about "bad" things: crime and punishment. Religion is about "good" things: holiness and devotion. The prisoner is considered a social outcast, shunned by the community. The religious experience of "conversion" (or, as Muslims say, "reversion") promises to transform the prison experience from "you are caught" to "you are free."

This FOCUS reports the results of a multiphase, national study of religion funded by Pew Charitable Trusts and conducted by a team of researchers from Rutgers University and NCCD. A complete description of the study is in progress (Clear, et al., 1992). In this

FROM THE PRESIDENT

This issue of FOCUS deals with the impact of religion on the adjustment of prisoners. During the recent decade in which the punitive ethos replaced rehabilitation in corrections, religious programming remained one of the rare positive programs behind the walls. National and local religious groups have actively lobbied for prison ministries and better treatment of inmates.

The study involves interviews with over 700 inmates in 20 prisons across the nation. These structured interviews were supplemented with ethnographic observations and more open-ended interview with prisoners and prison religious staff.

Discussed in this issue of FOCUS are the questions of prisoner adjustment and institutional infractions. The researchers also looked at the effect of inmate characteristics and criminal histories on religious participation.

It is our hope that this study of religion in prison responds to a major gap in knowledge about what goes on behind the prison walls. We believe that the researchers have revealed important aspects of the religious experience in prisons. Further, they provide important new insights into the psychological problems faced by prisoners and various possible solutions to these problems. In future research, NCCD expects to examine the longer term effects of religiosity on reducing recidivism.

Barry Krisberg, Ph.D.

report we address one of the basic questions of that study: "Does religion assist adjustment to prison?"

THE RESEARCH STRATEGY

To answer this question, we needed first to be able to measure the level of a prisoner's religiousness. No accepted methods existed for this task, so we worked with a team of inmates from a midwestern maximum-security prison to adapt a questionnaire developed by Hunt and King (1971). The resulting instrument, called the *Prisoner Values Survey*, produces a multidimensional assessment of a prisoner's religious belief and behavior.

There is no straightforward way to validate a self-reported measure of religiousness. To ask "experts" to evaluate the subject's religiosity in prison is a problem, because inmates are loathe to talk about each other to outsiders, and prison officials lack a good vantage point for evaluating the sincerity of an inmate's religious behavior. This point was brought home to us when, in a series of "blind" assessments completed for the study, chaplains and correctional counselors did not agree on the religiousness of specific prisoners. As the prisoners in our study often remarked, "Only God can know what is in a man's heart."

We are satisfied with the usefulness of *The Prisoner Values Survey* for several reasons. First, those scoring in the top 20 percent of its total score tended to be identified as "devout"

by the raters who would know them best — chaplains and the study's ethnographer. Second, in the end, it is prisoners themselves who are in the best position to say how much they value religion. Third, the average total scale scores are highest for Muslims, whose religious teachings command disciplined observance of the doctrines of the faith, and they are lowest for our respondents who identify themselves as having "no preference" or "nonbelievers."

The research reported here took place in 20 prisons in 12 states, represented all regions of the United States, included all levels of security and types of inmates, and lasted more than three years. The methods included two ethnographic studies lasting over a year, the administration of questionnaires to 769 male inmates, focus group interviews with religious and nonreligious inmates in 12 prisons, and interviews of several dozen chaplains,

administrators, correctional officers, and various other correctional staff.

RELIGION AND ADJUSTMENT

"Adjustment" to prison is thought of in two ways: coping and avoiding trouble. An inmate is described as having "coped" with prison if he feels he is able to "get along" in the prison setting without feeling unduly threatened, anxious, or upset. An inmate avoids trouble by staying free of infractions while incarcerated. To measure the relationship

TABLE 1:
SELECTED CORRELATIONS¹

	ADJUST	INFRACS	RELIG
ADJUST	1.0	.04	.11
INFRACS	.04	1.0	-.24
RELIG	.11	-.24	1.0
AGE	.19	-.07	.16
AGERELIG	.18	-.18	.59
RACE	-.09	-.05	-.20
ESTEEM	.21	-.01	.21
MASTERY	.22	-.02	.30
DEPRESS	.51	-.06	.20
TSERVE	.07	.30	-.08
PROGRAMS	.09	.06	.16
PRIORS	.02	.22	-.15

¹Correlations of .07 or higher are significant at approximately the .05 level; correlations of .10 are significant at approximately the .01 level.

between these two types of adjustment and religion, we gathered three types of data.

- Measures of religiousness: The total score on the *Prisoner Values Survey*, called RELIG.
- Measures of adjustment: The total score on the *Wright Prison Adjustment Questionnaire* (Wright, 1989), called ADJUST, and the total number of self-reported institutional infractions, called INFRACS.
- Covariate measures: Two categories of covariates were gathered: psychological measures ("self-esteem," "depression, and "mastery" standard scales), and demographic data (correlates of risk and personal attributes).

To obtain a sample of inmates from whom we could collect these data, we first identified prisons with active religious programming and with administrations that would allow us into their facilities to conduct our research. In the end, 20 prisons participated in the project. In each of these prisons, a staff member (usually the prison chaplain) actively recruited both religious and nonreligious inmates for our study. Ultimately, 769 inmate volunteers completed our survey instruments.

Since we had limited ourselves to male prisons, all of our volunteers were male. Forty-three percent were white, 42 percent were black, and 9 percent were hispanic. Inmates of all ages volunteered: 6 percent were 20 or younger

(the youngest being 17 years old); 24 percent were 21-24; 21 percent were 26-30; 19 percent were 31-35; 14 percent were 36-40; and 16 percent were over age 40 (the oldest being 75 years old). Over one-half were Protestant; nearly two-thirds were Christian; 8 percent were Muslim; and 15 percent stated "no preference" when asked their religion.

Table 1 displays the correlation matrix of selected variables with adjustment and infractions. This table indicates that:

- Religiosity is related both to infractions and to adjustment.
- Adjustment and infractions are unrelated, indicating that these are distinct aspects of prison adaptation.
- Consistent with prior studies of prison adjustment, the inmate's age, time served, and participation in certain prison programs relate to both adjustment and infractions.
- Adjustment relates to self esteem, depression, and mastery, underscoring the psychological nature of that measure of adjustment. Infractions do not relate to these variables.

**TABLE 2:
REGRESSION OF PRISON ADJUSTMENT
SCORES ON INMATE DEMOGRAPHIC AND
PERSONAL CORRELATES**

Variable	B	Beta	Sig.
DEPRESS	.61	.50	.00
RACE	-1.79	-.14	.00
AGE	.06	.08	.00
RELIG	ns	ns	ns
ESTEEM	ns	ns	ns
MASTERY	ns	ns	ns
R ² = .29			

- Infractions tend to relate to justice system variables that, in previous studies, have been related to risk of institutional misbehavior: drug use, security level, prior record, and current offense.

- Prior record relates negatively to the degree of religiosity.

MULTIVARIATE ANALYSES

Since we wanted to determine the relative importance of religion independent of those other measures, we turned to a series of multivariate analyses to further explore this relationship.

Table 2 presents the results of a stepwise, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of adjustment (ADJUST) on the variables correlated with it at the bivariate level. Depression, race, and age are all significantly associ-

TABLE 3:

REGRESSION OF INFRACTIONS ON
CORRELATES WITH RELIGION FORCED IN AS
LAST STEP IN REGRESSION

Variable	B	Beta	Sig.
POT	.34	.06	.14
THEFT	.02	.09	.03
PERSON	.93	.16	.00
PRIORS	.41	.21	.00
AGE	-.03	-.10	.13
RELIG	-.03	-.20	.00

R² = .39

ated with ADJUST; after these variables are entered into the equation, RELIG is not significantly associated with total adjustment. Older non-whites who are less depressed seem to be more well adjusted to prison, regardless of their religious participation.

We then calculated a stepwise, OLS regression of total number of institutional infractions (INFRACTS) using the significant bivariate correlates. A number of variables form an equation for infractions, with total religion score (RELIG) entering the equation first (indicating it is the single, most powerful univariate predictor of INFRACTS). As a further test of the power of religion as related to infractions, we recalculated an OLS regression, forcing first into the equation the variables that entered the original equation after the religion score.

The multivariate analyses may be summarized in a very straightforward manner: religiousness is directly important in reducing infractions; however, its importance in increasing adjustment is less clear, when one takes into account its association with depression.

REASONS FOR IMPROVED
ADJUSTMENT TO PRISON

How does religion help inmates adjust to prison? We conducted a series of individual and group interviews to address this question, and the responses of prisoners in our study indicate two major ways that religion might help to improve adjustment to prison: dealing with the *emotional strains* of incarceration and dealing with the *deprivations* of the prison environment.

We then entered RELIG as a second step. The results were, that once again, RELIG was an important variable, significantly explaining INFRACTS, even after other variables had been entered into the equation. This result, shown in Table 3, confirms the importance of RELIG as a potential suppressor of INFRACTS.

DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL
STRAINS OF INCARCERATION

One of the most common answers to our questions about the motivations for religion in prison had to do with the dissonance the inmate feels about being in prison.

Being incarcerated makes you bitter toward the world. They think it is going to make you better, but it does not.

Religion — in its substance — holds possible routes out of the dilemma, for it not only explains the cause of the failure, it also prescribes the solution.

The true religious, they become stronger. They can deal with the ills that affect them, and they can ease the ills that affect you, and [they can] cause you to be able to avoid more crimes.

There are three general ways in which prisoners say religion can ease the pains of incarceration.

1. Dealing with guilt. With the exception of loss of freedom, the most powerful message of imprisonment is guilt. Prisoners can turn to religion for relief, as a kind of exculpatory acceptance of the workings of evil in the world, or as atonement and forgiveness.

Being a Christian, I can go and ask Jesus Christ to forgive me for my sins and to give me the strength to deal with my problems.

...beware of the tricks of the devil. He has a lot of tricks. He uses the things of the world. He will use people to get

in your face.... He uses different ways, but you have to be wise. You have to avoid it.

Many religious inmates did not excuse their guilt. Instead, they seemed to accept a profound personal responsibility for their crimes and for the wrongfulness of their conduct. As one inmate said:

If you talk to everyone here, they'll tell you they're in prison because of a mistake. Most of them, it was a bad attorney, a judge, a stupid mistake in the way they did the crime. The religious inmate, he realizes the mistake was doing the crime in the first place.

2. Finding a new way of life. One of the main themes religious inmates provided in discussing the importance of their faith is that it "changed" them. One inmate put it eloquently:

My faith has made me excited about when I go home. This person has never been on the streets before.

Religion is a guide how not to get out of hand; it gives you a straight path.

Inmates who adopt religion tend to be deeply committed to doctrinaire models of religious living. This is an indication of how attractive the *certainty* of religious doctrines can be for inmates. It facilitates a type of "total replacement," whereby the ways of the past are subordinated to a new, fully developed way of living, one that can be thought of as "proven."

Before I became a Muslim, I would not even think of what the conse-

quences were. But religion teaches you these things; it makes you more conscious to every act you do.

A second way that inmates draw meaning from their religious orientation is the way in which they feel an active role of God in their lives. They report a change in their sense of personal power, which they say enables them to cope with the pressures of prison.

We ain't did nothing. Anything that's happened in our lives, He [God] has done.... The Father wants you to be completely empty so he can fill you.

3. Dealing with the loss, especially of freedom. Finally, there is what might be thought of as the central intrinsic motivation for religiousness: a personal sense of peace. This was perhaps the most common way inmates explained to us the value of adopting religion as a life guide — it enabled them to find "peace."

It is not the prison that incarcerates us, it is a man's mind.

I am able to live a normal life and uphold my character with dignity. The first objective of prisons is to strip you of your dignity. It takes your self-esteem, your dignity, and everything about you. Religion has helped me to regain this.

Certainly, this "freedom" is an important doctrine of certain branches of Islam and Christianity where a sharp distinction is made between things of "the world" and that which is

spiritual or "belongs" to God. Followers are taught to value the latter, giving it primacy of attention and interest, while being careful to avoid inordinate concern about the former. In prison, where there is such a dominance of threat and deprivation, this is very sage teaching, for the person who focuses on the losses incurred by being incarcerated is likely to become embittered.

[My faith] was not as strong until after being incarcerated. Suddenly I found myself alone and with no one. That is when religion and belief in God became stronger. It kept me sane.

One way to understand this idea of "peace" is to relate it to the primary deprivation of the prison: freedom. There is no deprivation more fundamental to the prison than the loss of freedom. Whatever else the prison does, it makes the inmate stay in a place he would not choose. Unlike other deprivations, such as safety or affiliation, there appears no obvious way to meet this need in the prison. Yet inmates who are deeply committed to their religiousness often report that the main benefit of their faith is a sense of inner peace.

The only thing that is lacking in here is freedom of movement and women, but that is only a state of mind. I've seen some guys who don't really realize that they are in prison because it is not the prison that they see, it is the walk with God. Prison doesn't bother them anymore.

DEALING WITH THE DEPRIVATIONS OF IMPRISONMENT

The combination of the deprivations imposed by prison life and the negativistic culture imported into it make the prison environment a difficult setting in which to live. Religious programs can be designed to ameliorate the harsh environment of the prison: the lack of safety, material comforts, and heterosexual contact.

- **Safety.** The image of the prison as a kind of concentrated community of threatening men is widely shared. After all, prisons are filled with offenders, and many of them are there because a court felt they represented a threat to the safety of outside communities.

There are some prisoners for whom safety concerns may be heightened, especially the physically weak, effeminate, openly homosexual, or convicted sex offenders.

The sex offenders show up in the Christian group so they won't get hurt. They need to get protected.

A person with a nasty crime is accepted into the group. Whether you did the crime or not, they are going to protect you.

Even for inmates who are not especially weak, the chapel is a safe haven, a place an inmate can go where the safety threats of prison life are lessened. Involvement in religion exposes a prisoner less to the problems of prison life, merely by socialization with other religious inmates.

When I am talking about "protection," I am talking about it as protection against myself. I can protect myself from the things that I would do that would cause me to violate and get more time.

Being a Muslim will benefit you spiritually, your soul, and then there are other aspects, like protection. Muslims are obligated to protect another Muslim if they aren't doing anything wrong. We don't support anything that is wrong. If the guy is weak, and we know that he is weak, we are obligated to protect him and help him grow spiritually, because we don't know what is in his heart.

- **Material comforts.** Inmates are paid minuscule wages and provided with only the basics of daily living. To make life in prison approach tolerability, a prisoner must find a way to soften the impact of material deprivations. Often, what constitutes material comfort in the context of the prison, can seem pathetic by free world standards. But when a prisoner has to pay \$.50 for potato chips, and this constitutes two hours of pay, a free helping of cookies or a couple of soft drinks can be an important benefit of a program.

The big thing is that everyone knew that the Father was bringing in cookies and cakes and doughnuts and so forth. So naturally, everyone wanted to come.

In every prison in our study, there were advantages in material sustenance for those who would participate in

religious activities. In a couple of prisons, the chaplain would allow extra phone calls for the faithful; in others, he would provide extra postage for letters. Church services often were followed by informal gatherings, where punch and various cookies and cakes would be served. Leftovers could be taken back to cells or sold or traded for other goods. Always, the willingness to attend a service enabled the inmate to leave the monotony of his cell or dorm.

- **Access to outsiders.** Participation in religious programs also provided access to outsiders, particularly women. When we asked inmates to talk to us about the deprivations they experienced in prison, contacts with free-worlders were mentioned, and special emphasis was given to the opportunities religious services provided to meet women.

Because a lot of women come from the outside. There are a couple of cuties coming in, the word gets around. They have been in jail so they want to see the women.

Sometimes there will be some good-looking ladies [volunteers] in the chapel on a Sunday. Then you're likely to see this place filled, with all the guys coming here to stare and laugh and say rude stuff to each other.

The inmate who can meet women is thus able to defeat the walls, in a way. He can reclaim one of the amenities of life he lost when he entered the prison, although the accomplishment is only partial and is distorted. Inmates often

discussed this aspect by recalling unusual events that took on the importance of prison legends.

SUMMARY

Our research uncovered an abundant variety of religious responses to incarceration. Variations existed in almost every aspect of religious life: motivations, practices, lifestyle, background, context, and intensity. These variations were deeply influenced by particular characteristics of the prison, the chaplain, and the inmate social system. Thus, our conclusions suggest a complex, interactive relationship among the inmate, the prison, the religious programming, and type and degree of institutional adjustment (Clear, et al., 1992). Nonetheless, we are able to identify two general ways in which involvement in religious programs can help inmates adjust to prison.

First, the religious participation can help an inmate overcome the depression, guilt, and self-contempt that so often accompanies the prison sentence. This is especially the case for younger inmates who lack experience coping with prison. These inmates can immerse themselves in the teachings of a faith as a way to restore a sense of self-control in the face of the often dehumanizing prison environment.

He may be angry but he controls his anger. He may start to say something with a bad tongue, but he will catch it. It is an overall attitude, physical and mental, which is very apparent. You would believe that person. You would notice that he is not like the rest.

These inmates are likely to demonstrate a reduced sense of personal threat and aimlessness in the prison environment. They are less depressed, more optimistic, less threatened, and more physically comfortable than their less religious peers. Looking for a way to overcome the emotional strains of incarceration, they find comfort in their religious practice.

Second, other inmates, older and more experienced, may seek a way to avoid the constant threats faced in prison. Involvement in religion can reinforce attitudes and behaviors that circumvent the traditional hustles of prison life.

Most of them are very quiet. They keep to themselves. They are not always in scuffles and scrapes and things of that nature. He is never arguing with the police, and can't accept where he is at.

These inmates will spend their time in the chapel, associate with other, like-minded religious inmates, and generally surround themselves with a protective social cocoon of religion.

In many ways, the prisoner's desire for religion is not very different from that of the free-world citizen. He/she seeks religion to make life more livable. For some, life is improved by finding the emotional supports religion can supply. For others, religion provides an environmental support structure to help avoid the difficulties of prison society.

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