

Editorial

Prisoner Reformation and the Promise of Religion

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Why do so many prisoners seek religious instruction and guidance while incarcerated? What aspects (or dimensions) of religiosity are translated into tools for promoting law-abiding behaviors and a life free of recidivism (Morag and Teman 2018)? For the longest of times, stories of prisoner restoration, redemption, and the quest for behavioral change have captured the research interests of various scholars across several disciplines. Over the last 30 years, scholars and practitioners have explored the widespread availability and potential role of spiritual and religious programming in correctional institutions and the reentry process (Clear et al. 2000). The evidence suggests that many prisoners find solace and inner peace from religious instruction—provided through prison ministries—while incarcerated. Theoretically, religious institutions and programs are ideal pathways for the development of social bonds because they are a “community institution” embedded within the social life and fabric of a neighborhood (McRoberts 2002). While few would question the social control aspects of religion while incarcerated, a greater concern is whether participation in a religious rehabilitation program facilitates successful reentry into the community, and if so, how?

Currently, there are 2.2 million people in the nation’s prisons and jails—a 500% increase over the last 40 years. The vast majority of prisoners—98%—will eventually leave prison and return to our communities (U.S. Department of Justice 2017). For many, religious involvement and support have been recognized as important theoretical and practical variables in current efforts to develop successful reentry pathways (Stansfield et al. 2017). Among prisoners serving longer sentences, seeking religious guidance and instruction is a common endeavor with numerous perceived benefits. It can rid oneself of negative, self-destructive while connecting them to something bigger than their circumstances. For those who have transformed their lives for the better, some proudly testify about their newfound faith and belief in a higher power (or a supreme being). Theoretically, this acts as a social control mechanism, regulating the behavior of the converted, while consequently providing a welcomed reprieve to correctional staff tasked with managing and controlling inmate populations.



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1. The Role of Religion

Some prison chaplains, religious groups, and volunteers who serve prisoners believe that the primary role of religion in correction is not to change a prisoner’s behavior or reduce recidivism, but rather to buffer and prevent the further loss of dignity and humanity of those who are placed in the inherently dehumanizing conditions of prison (Clear and Sumter 2002). Religious involvement and instruction also promote faith development, cognitive coping, purpose, and meaning in the lives of prisoners (Dammer 2002; O’Connor and Duncan 2011). Indeed, the embrace of religion enables a healthier adaptation to prison life, an increased hope for the future, and positive adjustment in the community post-release (Clear and Sumter 2002). Thus, religion not only has the potential to offer a strong conventional belief system and set of prosocial friends and acquaintances but can offer an institutional support network. As a result, newly released prisoners, clinging to their faith, can build and repair relationships, find jobs, safe accommodation, health services, and social support (Weaver and Campbell 2015).

In an earlier publication, I saw the value of religion through the lens of social control theory, as advanced by Travis Hirschi nearly six decades earlier (Ross 1994). This theory posed the central question of why do people obey the law? The theory suggests that people engage in criminal activity when their bonds to societal institutions—like religion or education—are either weakened, broken, or severed. Moreover, the theory refers to a perspective that predicts that when social constraints on antisocial behavior are weakened or absent, delinquent behavior emerges. Once delinquency sets in, more serious criminal behaviors are likely, accelerating a path toward adult crime that might lead to incarceration.

2. Scriptural References of Forgiveness and Restoration

Regardless of one's religious denomination, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, New Age, Interfaith, Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, or otherwise, there is power in prayer to one's chosen God. This power embodies certain transformative characteristics, laced with spiritual virtues, capable of changing lives while fulfilling the needs of those seeking redemption and restoration for their transgressions. For instance, when someone is spiritually "born again" we might ask what must they do to stay on the straight and narrow path of law-abiding behavior? Toward this end, the powers and promise of religious worship abound through the verses of all holy books, providing ardent believers with the spiritual ammunition to conquer demons that invite criminal behavior. This promise is found among all religions and benefits those seeking restoration and salvation both within and beyond prison walls.

Indeed, promises of restoration and rehabilitation are scattered widely throughout the holy books, as illustrated among three religious faiths in particular. For Christians, beginning in the Old Testament, Ezekiel 36:26, NIV states: A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. The New Testament follows with the book of James 5:16, speaking of the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man, which flows nicely into the sentiments of Second Timothy 2:22–26, NIV. Even second Corinthians 5:17, NIV provides the familiar verse—Therefore if any man [be] in Christ, [he is] a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new. Additional solace is found in 1 John 1:9, NIV, where confession is not only good for the soul but will purify us from all unrighteousness.

Among Muslim prisoners, the Holy Quran remains the sole source of authentic authority and the miracles and inspiration that come from its holy words are described as endless and boundless. For instance, Quran 8:33 states "And Allah would not punish them while they seek forgiveness", serving as a friendly reminder of the power of His mercy and the importance of asking for forgiveness. Since all people seek mercy and compassion, this verse implores worshipers to always cling to hope in knowing that forgiveness and mercy are but a prayer away. Similar inspiration flows from the verses "Say, 'O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah'".

For Jewish prisoners, a Torah-true life can be the foremost force in this rehabilitative process. Moreover, the Jewish tradition teaches that everything in this universe was created with a positive purpose—to be utilized completely without waste (Talmud Shabbos 77b; Bereishis Rabba 44:1 10:7. Cited from (Lipskar 2020)). Accordingly, in the criminal legal system, punishments should effect direct results and benefits for all parties involved: the perpetrator, the victim, and society in general. For serious and proper rehabilitation—called "Teshuvah" ("return") in the Jewish tradition—there are two necessary prerequisites. These include remorse for the past and resolution for the future (Lipskar 2020). In the prison environment—where one is separated from society and sheds much of the externalities of societal pressures and facades—one may begin a realistic and objective evaluation of self and structure a pattern for improvement (Talmud Berachos 60b; Likutei Torah Nasso 25c. Cited from (Lipskar 2020)).

3. Clouds without Water?

The aforementioned examples from the aforementioned religious faiths demonstrate the promise of forgiveness and reformation. Yet, we are left to question how can one best provide evidence of reformation and rehabilitation in terms satisfactory to correctional staff, prison administrators, and parole boards? How can we be sure that the system is not *being played* by those professing to have “changed for the good” as a result of their newly found faith and religion? Without question, some prisoners are genuine—while others are disingenuous. For those who falsely claim to know God, the Christian bible characterizes them as “clouds without water”. According to the Christian book of Jude (1:12, NIV), these ungodly or godless men are like brute beasts, late autumn trees without fruit, raging waves of the sea, and wandering stars, among other descriptions. Moreover, some profess to know God—but are possibly wolves in sheep’s clothing, perpetrating religious blasphemy; true manipulators of the highest order. Correctional staff are reasonable to look for objective evidence of “changed behavior”.

However, our criminal legal system need not be solely punitive. While it is reasonable to question a prisoner’s motivation for seeking leniency in punishment, early release, and other accommodations, there are commonly accepted indicators of “changed behavior”. Praying unceasingly, thinking differently about obeying the law, and ceasing criminal involvement are all valid and reasonable measures of changed behavior, influenced by religion, among other factors. Since the 1950s and 1960s, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has played a prominent role in attempting to change the way prisoners think. One important part of CBT is helping clients figure out what they most want from life and to move toward achieving their vision (Beck 1995; Ellis 2019). The potential of religion can also alter the way prisoners think in terms that are not only life-changing, but permanent in affecting behavior. According to Keller (2008), “the way to change behavior is to change what you worship”. There is no greater form of worship than religious worship, and there is ample room to consider the role of religion in changing the behaviors of those incarcerated. Yet, how do we know when someone has truly changed? Perhaps the answer is that we can only judge them by their actions and not by their words. However, since religion is a matter of faith, it might boil down to whether the person believes they have changed. And if they do—who are we to say otherwise?

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