

Religion as a Factor of (Social) Support in Serving a Prison Sentence*

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At the end of the last and the beginning of the new millennium, research indicated the growing significance of religion for convicted individuals serving prison sentences. It has been shown that dedication to religion can play a significant role in the primary prevention of delinquent behavior, as well as in rehabilitation and the reduction of recidivism. During the prison sentence, commitment to religious life can provide social support to the convicted individuals, helping to reduce isolation, increase the sense of belonging, and create social networks and group connections that strengthen emotional support and psychological resilience. The main aim of this paper is to highlight why it is important to seriously consider the potential of religion as a factor in the social, and then moral, transformation of convicted individuals, given that this issue has been rarely addressed from sociological, penological, and criminological perspectives. This is a review paper in which the author attempts to provide a theoretical and hypothetical framework for future empirical research that could test the thesis of religion's supportive role in the prison environment. Besides offering a framework for collective identity and ensuring the preservation of social order and structure from a sociological perspective, religion contributes to fulfilling needs for belonging, rootedness, and meaning. From criminological positions, its broader significance in the field of social control, or conventional or normative individual behavior, is recognized, with its protective and prosocial functions being highlighted in prison research. Engaging with this topic would strengthen the sociological approach to the study of religion in specific contexts like prison and would indirectly contribute to the formation of a Sociology of Prison Life. Additionally, it would have significant implications for creating certain measures and policies regarding individuals serving prison sentences, aimed at improving the moral and social climate in prisons.

* This paper was presented by Teodora Gojković as part of her plenary session at the International Scientific Conference "Life in Prison", organised by the Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research and held in Belgrade, Serbia, from 2 to 3 December 2024.

Recommended citation: Gojković, T. (2024). Religion as a Factor of (Social) Support in Serving a Prison Sentence. In M. Milićević, I. Stevanović, & Lj. Ilijić (Eds.), *Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference "Life in Prison: Criminological, Penological, Psychological, Sociological, Legal, Security, and Medical Issues"* (pp. 493–500). Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research. <https://doi.org/10.47152/PrisonLIFE2024.12>

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KEYWORDS: religion / social support / convicted individuals / prison sentence / prosocial behavior

Introduction

Although the presence of religion in prisons is not new, it has only recently gained significant attention from the scientific community as a subject of research, particularly after James Beckford and Sophie Gilliat published their book *Religion in Prison: 'Equal Rites' in a Multi-Faith Society*, which remains notable as the first detailed study on the relationships between the Anglican Church and other faiths within prison chaplaincy, examining the role of Anglican chaplains in providing religious and pastoral care to non-Christian prisoner populations (Beckford & Gilliat, 2005). Since then, numerous studies have been conducted on this topic (Beckford & Gilliat, 2005; Johnson & Wubbenhorst, 2011; Johnson et al., 2018). It has been shown that religion positively impacts prisoners; that dedication to religion can favorably affect their rehabilitation; that it influences their adjustment to prison life; significantly reduces recidivism rates, and decreases the likelihood of prisoners getting into conflict situations within prison (Clear & Sumter, 2002). Additionally, religion provides various coping mechanisms for dealing with prison life, as it enables moral management of prisoners' emotional states, helps achieve a sense of personal control and purpose, and offers opportunities for providing social support (Drakeford, 2018). Some authors have concluded, based on empirical findings, that the effectiveness of religiosity and religious programs for individuals in prison depends on whether they can promote prosocial forms of behavior (Kerley et al., 2005). Social environment factors play an important role in shaping behavior, and the prison social environment is one of the central factors that ensures that achieved positive changes in behavior are maintained and generalized. Additionally, an improved social climate in institutions can facilitate more active engagement of inmates in treatment programs and lead to a higher level of positive behavioral changes. From the perspective of professionals, it can enhance staff well-being and their commitment to the job, thereby increasing the effectiveness of their involvement (Pavićević et al., 2024, p. 152).

Functions of Religion During the Serving of a Prison Sentence

Social support can be defined as the perceived availability or actual provision of social resources within relationships (Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). Also, this concept could be understood as 'the perceived quality of life conditions in prison, including interpersonal relationships as well as the material and organizational dimensions of prison life' (Ilijić et al., 2024, as cited in Čopić et al., 2024, p. 15). On the other hand, religion can be understood as 'a distinct way of life that is

described in its teachings, experienced through a special kind of experiences, realized in its rituals, expressed in its symbols, reflected in its supreme values, prescribed in its norms, embodied in the communities of believers, reinforced in institutions, incarnated in sacred figures, felt in sacred places, and in sacred time' (Šušnjić, 1998, p. 50).

Understanding how support is provided to prisoners and the factors affecting their level of social support is crucial for working on their mental well-being, as the prisoner population is at a higher risk of mental illness compared to the general population (Dadi et al., 2019). Assuming that serving a prison sentence is a stressful experience, social support in prison could enhance coping abilities, which in turn would improve the mental well-being of individuals sentenced to prison (Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). In this sense, it would include support from fellow inmates, prison staff, as well as friends, family members, and partners (Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). As such, social support is a tool for alleviating the social difficulties and issues prisoners face while in prison and is very useful for reducing mental health problems and their consequences, thus warranting efforts to strengthen it (Dadi et al., 2019). Social support is crucial during incarceration and in the period following release to facilitate transition, avoid recidivism, and increase the likelihood of avoiding health-risk behaviors without the influence of psychological morbidity (Dadi et al., 2019).

Research shows that people in prison often suffer from mental illnesses of varying degrees and generally lack adequate access to integrated mental health services (Fazel et al., 2016; House et al., 1985). On the other hand, it has been empirically confirmed that within the general population, religion has a positive effect on maintaining mental and physical health (Balboni et al., 2015). Considering that numerous studies have shown that good social support contributes to positive mental and physical well-being (Dadi et al., 2019), we can assume that religious engagement of convicted individuals serving a prison sentence could contribute to improving their social support and, consequently, their well-being.

Two important functions of religion have been detected in the criminological context – it can have a protective role, related to its potential to prevent the emergence and development of criminal behavior (Johnson & Schroeder, 2014), and another function related to promoting and encouraging prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior includes all forms of socially useful, conventional, or normative behavior that contribute to the preservation of social order and structure. In criminology, religion has been found to positively influence well-being, the provision of meaning and purpose, self-esteem, and educational achievement (Milićević & Gojković, 2024). Additionally, religiosity and spirituality have been observed as key ways for prisoners to cope with the harsh conditions of prison life and as mechanisms through which they can find inner

peace, become more altruistic, and gain respect from other prisoners (Clear & Sumter, 2002).

When discussing the impact of religion on providing social support to convicted individuals, we refer to its contribution to reducing their isolation and increasing their sense of belonging, as some studies have shown that it can create social networks and group connections that offer emotional support and strengthen psychological resilience (Drakeford, 2018). At the level of the prisoner population, social support is essential to prevent feelings of guilt and homelessness and to maintain their physical and mental well-being (Dadi et al., 2019). Furthermore, various factors such as gender, religion, and education level can significantly affect the perceived social support of prisoners (Dadi et al., 2019). Religion often appears as a mediator in social interactions, facilitating communication and cooperation between different groups within the prison, and one study has recognized religious practices as a factor that encourages positive interaction between prison staff and religious officials as well as between prison staff and convicted individuals (Chui & Cheng, 2013; Yin, 2022, as cited in Milićević & Gojković, 2024, p. 69).

What Do Studies Tell Us About the Connection Between Religion and Social Support for Inmates Serving Prison Sentences?

Studies that directly connect religious practice in prisons with the social support received by inmates based on their religious beliefs are very rare. We often draw conclusions about the relationship between these two dimensions indirectly, through examining other variables and their connections with different aspects of life in prison. Below is a review of the few studies that have recognized the significance of this topic.

Byron R. Johnson is one of the authors who consistently addresses the issue of religion in prisons from various perspectives. Grant Duwe and him, using the Risk–Need–Responsivity model while surveying over 2,000 inmates in Minnesota, found that higher religiosity among inmates was associated with fewer offenses and lower recidivism, but only for those who had less social support and possessed more positive social identities. This result was contrary to initial expectations (Duwe & Johnson, 2023). Another study aimed at determining the level of social support and the factors associated with it in selected prison institutions in Northwestern Ethiopia showed that inmates' religion significantly influenced the level of social support – compared to followers of other religions, Orthodox Christian respondents had a 52% higher probability of receiving good social support (Dadi et al., 2019).

A study conducted in Mississippi found that inmates participating in Christian religious epiphanies received social support through engagement with other

believers, meaning that participation in epiphanies helped in developing social support networks – in other words, religious participation can contribute to greater social support when all group members share at least one common value (Dadi et al., 2019). Kerley et al. (2005) demonstrated that religiosity reduces the likelihood of conflicts among inmates both directly and indirectly.

The results of the 2024 PrisonLIFE research project, titled *Assessment and Possibilities for Improving the Quality of Prison Life of Prisoners in the Republic of Serbia: Criminological-Penological, Psychological, Sociological, Legal, and Security Aspects*, showed that religious devotion and certain dimensions of social support for inmates serving prison sentences are positively correlated. Dimensions that can be associated with social support in prison conditions (such as contact with family) were examined as sub-dimensions of the quality of prison life. First, among respondents who practiced religious customs in prison, a higher average rating was recorded for the quality of prison life (3.20) compared to respondents who did not practice religious customs (2.94) (Milićević & Gojković, 2024). Second, respondents who had the opportunity to practice religious customs rated living conditions and family contact significantly better (3.59) compared to those who did not have this opportunity (2.99) – this group of respondents reported easier maintenance of family connections, which was interpreted as a result of the positive correlation between allowing religious practices in prisons and the general perception of living conditions and family connections, which, ultimately, positively affects the mental health and well-being of inmates serving prison sentences (Milićević & Gojković, 2024). Similarly, respondents who were allowed and wished to practice religious customs in prison rated dimensions of harmony and professionalism better than those who could not and/or did not want to practice them. The authors interpreted this as meaning that these respondents perceive the overall prison atmosphere as more humane and caring, relationships with staff as higher quality and more constructive, and prison staff as more competent (Milićević & Gojković, 2024).

However, there are also studies indicating a negative relationship between religions and serving prison sentences. By interviewing male offenders serving time at the Cook County Jail in Chicago in the mid-1980s, it was found that there was a decrease in the intensity of religious beliefs during their incarceration – specifically, respondents who had been serving time for a year or more reported feeling as though God had abandoned them and were unwilling to adhere to legally mandated values and attitudes (Peretti & McIntyre, 1984). Researchers then reported a decline in participants' attitudes toward interacting with others in society in a spirit of cooperation, honesty, and trust; furthermore, respondents indicated that they lacked religious mechanisms to cope with conflicts and the unknown, leading them to conclude that incarceration could have a negative impact on fulfilling religious functions, which, in turn, could lead to personality dysfunction – values that the respondents held prior to entering prison were no

longer important, and motivation toward certain goals was lost (Peretti & McIntyre, 1984). A study on the effects of religion on negative emotions among offenders in a Colombian prison showed that private prayer was not significantly associated with the virtues of forgiveness, self-control, and gratitude.

Conclusion

The results of the mentioned PrisonLIFE research project show that involving inmates in religious activities can contribute to their more effective coping with stress encountered in prison conditions, while simultaneously providing access to support networks (Milićević & Gojković, 2024). Through the practice of religious rituals and participation in various social activities, inmates become active participants in creating a communal life within the prison (Brandner, 2020, as cited in Milićević & Gojković, 2024, pp. 68–69). Therefore, it is very important to pay more attention to improving conditions for practicing religion in prison settings, as this can help in creating an adequate moral and social climate that benefits both inmates serving prison sentences and prison staff. This would result in multiple benefits: firstly, creating a more humane and ‘friendly’ atmosphere in the prison; facilitating inmates’ adaptation to prison conditions; helping them find meaning in serving their prison sentence and achieve moral transformation; and easing their reintegration and resocialization, or post-penal reception. Considering that various social factors can condition the emergence and development of a ‘criminal career’ and its abandonment, the overall social climate in prisons can significantly shape the behavior of inmates (Pavićević et al., 2024). It should be noted that “a positive social climate in prisons is important because it contributes to the well-being of incarcerated individuals, mitigates the negative psychological effects of deprivation, facilitates adaptation to prison life conditions, and helps reduce conflicts and violence” (Ćopić et al., 2024, p. 15).

However, as Jang and Johnson note, most studies on this topic show that religion improves emotional or social well-being among incarcerated individuals, but few tell us how (Jang & Johnson, 2020). While criminologists have focused on studying whether religion improves emotional well-being among incarcerated individuals, they have largely neglected the question of how religion can enhance well-being and whether it helps men and women equally (Jang & Johnson, 2020). It would also be worthwhile to investigate whether religion in prisons can negatively impact the prosocial behavior of incarcerated individuals, especially considering the fact that there are extrinsic, pathological forms of religiosity that can be harmful to the moral and social climate in prisons, as well as to the moral and social transformation of individuals.

Acknowledgment

This paper is the result of research engagement according to the Working Plan and Programme of the Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research for the year 2024, number 451-03-66/2024-03/200039, approved by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia.

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