

The Opportunities for Empirical Study of Religiosity within the Prison Population: A Review of Selected Empirical Research¹

Teodora Gojković²

Historically, the idea of establishing the first penitentiary institutions in the 18th century was originally religious in nature. It was believed at that time that long-term isolation of offenders, combined with continuous and deep conversations with clergy – prison chaplains – would lead to their repentance and sincere regret for the sins they had committed. In a broader sense, religion in prison and prison in religion is not a new phenomenon, although it may appear so, since research on this topic is rare, and most of it dates back to the end of the last century. Based on findings about the inverse relationship between religion and crime, the main aim of this paper is to present the results of some studies that confirm the positive impact of religion on convicted individuals serving prison sentences. These studies provide evidence of religion's beneficial effects on the mental health of inmates; its positive influence on their adaptation to prison conditions; the impact of religion, spiritual leaders, and participation in religious programs in prisons on gaining social support and adopting prosocial values; its effect on preparing convicted individuals for life after release, i.e., their rehabilitation and reintegration; and on the quality of life in prisons, among other things. The paper is structured to first present the explanatory framework for research on religion in prisons; then it provides a review of some empirical studies on religion in U.S. prisons and two studies conducted in Serbia.

Although studies reporting negative findings regarding religious practice in prison conditions are even rarer, it is concluded that future research on this topic could examine whether religion might also produce negative effects on convicted individuals serving prison sentences, such as

¹ This work is the result of the engagement of the author in accordance with the Plan and program of work of the Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research based on contract no. 451-03-66/2024-03/200039 with the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia

² Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research; E-mail: teodoragojkovic9@gmail.com <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9489-3772>

antisocial behavior, extrinsic forms of religiosity, mental disorders, the spread of informal prison systems, and so on.

Keywords: *Religion, prisons, convicted persons, religious programs in prison, prison chaplains*

Introduction

Throughout the long history of penitentiary institutions, religion has been of particular importance in the treatment of offenders, and it could be said that the influence of religion and religious practices in this context is as old as the history of prisons (Dammer, 2002). Since the reign of Emperor Constantine, imprisonment under the jurisdiction of the church was established as a form of substitution for corporal or capital punishment, and by the 18th century, the isolation of offenders from the outside world became an entirely accepted correctional practice (Dammer, 2002). Even then, it was believed that long-term isolation, combined with continuous and deep conversations with clergy – prison chaplains – would lead to the offenders' repentance and sincere regret for the sins they had committed (Dammer, 2002). This initial influence of religion on the philosophy and design of the first correctional institutions, penitentiaries, as precursors to today's prisons, points to the fact that the very idea of the existence of prisons as we know them today is, in fact, originally religious.

Even in the Balkan region, the influence of Orthodox Christianity in prisons was such that, for instance, the legal system of Montenegro recognized the so-called prison ministry, or the existence of priestly service in prisons, since 1899, when an act of the Metropolitanate was passed, until the Austro-Hungarian occupation during World War I, in 1915 (Radoman, 2019, pp. 106–107). The spiritual service of prison chaplains was reflected in ensuring the conditions for fulfilling basic Christian duties within prisons. Prison priests were obligated to perform confessions and administer the Eucharist, in agreement with the prison governor. In the case of individuals sentenced to death, this meant that the priest had a strict obligation to call for repentance and communion, as “the Church of God shows compassion toward that person” (Radoman, 2019, p. 108). The essence of the prison ministry idea was based on the belief that “... the Orthodox Church does not abandon the faithful even when they fall into sin, but offers them spiritual help and comfort and calls for repentance for their misdeeds” (Pravilnik dužnosti sveštenika, 1901, as cited in Radoman, 2019, pp. 106–107).

In the literature, we find foreign studies that have explored the relationship between religion and criminal behavior, based on which it can be concluded that this relationship exists, that it is quite strong, inverse, and carries relevant implications for both theory and practice (Johnson & Schroeder, 2014). There is increasing evidence that religion, individual religious commitment, and affiliation with a religious community have the potential to prevent youth in high-risk urban environments from engaging in a wide range of delinquent behaviors, including both minor and more serious forms (Evans et al., 1996; Johnson et al., 2000; Regnerus, 2003; Wallace, 1998). Similarly, it has been shown that young people who continue to attend religious services and participate in religious activities are less likely to commit crimes or start a delinquent career during adolescence. This means that religious devotion stands out as an important protective factor in shielding young people (and adults) from delinquent behavior and deviant activities (Baier & Wright, 2001; Hirschi & Stark, 1969; Stark, Kent & Doyle, 1982).

The Importance of Studying Religion in Prisons – Explanatory and Contextual Framework

Sociologically, religion satisfies a range of human social needs, such as the need for social identity, the need for belonging, rootedness, and, in general, the need for meaning and a relationship with the transcendental (Opalić, 2008). Even sociological classics of functionalist provenance emphasized that religion has both a direct, socially integrative function and an indirect function, related to the psychological integrity of the individual. In this sense, it provides a framework for collective identity, integrating not only the individual but also entire social communities, satisfying the social need for maintaining order and stability, as well as ensuring a minimal degree of integration of different subsystems of the social system. This means that religious beliefs and symbols, shared by all members of society, facilitate the balanced functioning of the social system (Dirkem, 1982). Religion also meets other needs of humans as social beings, such as the need for social identity, belonging, rootedness, and, generally, the need for meaning and a relationship with the transcendental (Opalić, 2008). Religiosity increases life satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, hope, as well as the ability to control primal impulses and the willingness of believers to overcome negative life experiences (Opalić & Ljubičić, 2007).

Meeting religious expectations can lead to desirable outcomes, such as lower levels of drug use and increased prosocial behavior under the

influence of religion, or a deeper sense of belonging (Kimball, 2020). In addition to its protective function, religion can play a significant role in promoting prosocial behavior, as it is one of the many factors that, from the perspective of criminological theories of social control, can be said to “bind” the individual to society and conventional or normative behavior. This can be illustrated by considering the four elements of Hirschi’s social control theory – attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Hirschi & Stark, 1969). Research shows that religious commitment promotes or enhances beneficial outcomes, such as well-being (Musick, 1996; Willits & Crider, 1988), meaning and purpose (Sethi & Seligman, 1993), self-esteem (Bradley, 1995; Koenig et al., 1999), and educational achievement (Johnson et al., 2000; Regnerus, 2003). If we understand quality of life as an objective evaluation of the main aspects or the whole of life in society, and well-being as a subjective assessment of quality of life, or an abstraction relating to the quality of any of the many important aspects of life, a set of aspects, or their total number (Pavićević, Ilijić & Batrićević, 2024, p. 113), then by developing self-esteem, autonomy, responsibility, and trust, incarcerated individuals adopt prosocial values and embrace a positive identity, which contributes to the abandonment of criminal behavior and, consequently, the reduction of recidivism (Pavićević, Ilijić & Batrićević, p. 70).

James A. Beckford is one of the contemporary authors who emphasized the importance of studying religion in prisons, due to its connection with issues of terrorism and extremism among incarcerated individuals of the Muslim faith (Beckford, 2010). Highlighting the presence and spread of various religions in prisons and other state institutions in the United Kingdom, Beckford sought to demonstrate that the thesis of a post-secular paradigm in 21st-century Europe is not dominant. Around this time, specifically in 2005, he published, together with Sophie Gilliat, the first in-depth study on the relationship between the Anglican Church and other faiths in prison chaplaincies, investigating the increasingly controversial role of Anglican chaplains, which is reflected in the growing religious and pastoral care for incarcerated individuals who are not Christian. By comparing this situation in British prisons with that in the United States, the two authors showed how the fight for equal opportunities in a multifaith society politicizes the relationships between church, state, and religious minorities in England (Beckford & Gilliat, 2005; Milićević & Gojković, 2024).

Based on this, as well as many other empirical results from his studies on this topic, Beckford emphasized that for sociologists, the phenomenon of religion in prisons is important for three reasons – first, prisons are under

state control, yet incarcerated individuals perceive them as private spaces; second, minority religions are more prevalent among prisoners, which means that they are multifaith environments that must be managed appropriately; and finally, prisons are often places conducive to intense religious introspection and reflection (Beckford, 2010). Martínez-Ariño and Zwilling, in their review of the presence and role of religion in European prisons, noted that prisons are an interesting field of study for sociologists who want to explore how state policies are connected to the social and cultural diversity of people, and for sociologists who want to examine how large-scale social changes are reflected “in microcosm”. By focusing on clearly defined social contexts, such as prisons, sociologists are able to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the regulations and negotiations around religion as they happen in practice, beyond what legal frameworks prescribe (Martínez-Ariño & Zwilling, 2020, pp. 11–12).

As expected, with the democratization of many European countries in recent decades, which has brought with it the recognition of the right to religious freedom, religious diversity has become an important feature of prison systems. This is evident, both in the religious profile of prison populations and in the religious services and chaplaincies offered. In this sense, in countries where reliable statistics are available, such as Austria, Finland, and the Netherlands, the diversification of prisoners’ religious affiliations is evident and can be seen through the different models of chaplaincies offered to them (Martínez-Ariño & Zwilling, 2020, pp. 6–7). The extent to which religion has been revived in post-Soviet countries varies significantly from country to country, so examining their prison systems allows for more specific observations about how religion has repositioned itself during the transition to democracy in the post-communist era (Martínez-Ariño & Zwilling, 2020, pp. 11–12). For example, in some former socialist countries, such as Bulgaria and Romania, re-Christianization and the renewed importance of religion in prisons have been recorded, while in the Czech Republic, this is not the case, as religion remains relatively marginalized even in the post-socialist period (Horák, 2020; Staničić & Zrinščak, 2020, cited in Martínez-Ariño & Zwilling, 2020).

Overview of Empirical Research on Religion in Prisons

Religion Research in Prisons in the U.S.

One of the greater methodological challenges when conducting research in prisons is finding a balance between protecting the privacy of inmates and allowing their participation in the study. According to Abbott and colleagues, this balance is more likely to be achieved if the research is carefully planned, taking into account the specific challenges one may encounter in the prison context and the ways these challenges can be addressed through the application of appropriate methods (Abbott et al., 2018). They note the growing need for research on the experiences of people in prisons through qualitative methods, but emphasize that conducting such research is complicated by prison restrictions, inherent controls, and power imbalances in the prison context, which increase the risks of coercion and the emergence of certain barriers to participation, while the closed and inflexible nature of prisons and information security procedures also affects confidentiality and privacy, thus limiting access to participants (Abbott et al., 2018). Indeed, the decision to participate in research may be influenced by subtle incentives, such as access to services or resources, or by the promotion of positive relationships with prison staff. The visit of a researcher may also be perceived as a form of social support for the inmates and a break from monotony, which undermines the principle of voluntary consent as a basis for participant selection (Abbott et al., 2018).

In existing studies on religion in prisons, the role of religious expression in such a specific context has been examined, particularly in terms of its impact on the adaptation of inmates to prison life; the effect of religious beliefs on their mental health and behavior in prison (whether religion motivates positive or negative behaviors); whether religion promotes favorable outcomes in their resocialization; and whether the state should increase religious programs in prisons, given their more or less favorable effects.

Donald Clemmer, Erving Goffman, Gresham Sykes, and other authors whose research is considered pioneering in sociological studies of prison life, applied qualitative methods and a symbolic-interactionist theoretical approach to study various deprivations faced by inmates in the prison environment, with a particular focus on how the prison experience shapes their (altered) sense of self, adaptation, relationships with fellow inmates and staff, and so on (Drake, Darke & Earle, 2015). Clemmer coined the term “prisonization”, which refers to the influence of the prison experience on inmates, to the point where it results in the adoption of “prison customs, culture, and the general culture of the penitentiary” (Clemmer, 1958, p. 299).

The importance of how deeply an inmate integrates into the primary group within the prison community was particularly emphasized, as belonging to a primary group requires adherence to the “prison code”, or a system of norms that demands loyalty to the prison group and opposition to the staff (Clemmer, 1958; Drake et al., 2015). These studies and findings about the assimilating effects of the prison environment on inmates paved the way for the development of the Sociology of Prison Life in the mid-20th century. This discipline focuses on the systematic study of prison societies, prison staff culture, and/or prisons as organizations. Contemporary studies of prison life examine this world in various ways, through concepts such as space, place, architecture, gender, ethnicity, law, political economy, and national and global governance (Drake, Darke & Earle, 2015).

Since then, the rapid growth in the number of prisoners in the United States has driven increased interest in a deeper understanding of the social impact of incarceration. A regularity has been established, showing that prisoners are more likely to report mental health issues compared to the general population, with some studies estimating that as many as half of all prisoners experience some form of mental health problem (Drakeford, 2018). It has been found that one aspect of the prison environment that affects mental health is inmates’ participation in religious activities, with a generally positive correlation between individual religious practice and mental distress among inmates, conditioned by the intensity of religious practice and the type of religious activities (Drakeford, 2018).

In terms of the religious context in prisons, findings show that prisoners in very religious and very non-religious prisons reported fewer mental health problems compared to prisoners in institutions with a balanced religious context. This suggests that extreme religious or non-religious environments may reduce the sense of mental distress, while balanced environments may create additional stress or a sense of insecurity (Drakeford, 2018). In the case of inmates suffering from severe mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, research should be conducted to determine the social origins of schizophrenia – for instance, disturbed communication within a dysfunctional family system, where the ill person was a victim of so-called “double messages” in communication with their parents (double-bind) (Gojković, 2024). In systemic family therapy, there is a whole school that developed around this theoretical concept, which has been used as a hypothetical framework in many later studies on the etiopathogenesis of schizophrenia – although the prevailing impression is that these studies did not confirm the double-bind hypothesis, not only due to methodological flaws but also because they failed to uncover conceptual or operational schemes that would indicate the existence of double-bind communication

(Gojković, 2024). These studies were mainly conducted using qualitative methods – through interviews and content analysis of letters written by mothers to hospitalized schizophrenic children, but some authors also applied quantitative techniques, such as completing questionnaires or even resolving the inmate's dilemma (Beavers et al., 1965; Berger, 1965; Ringuette & Kennedy, 1966; Potash, 1965, as cited in Gojković, 2024, pp. 120–122).

At the same time, such findings suggest that religious expression in prisons may reduce the need for intervention by psychologists and psychiatrists or for eventual treatment of inmates with psychiatric disorders in asylum-type psychiatric institutions after leaving prison. This assumption is based on the ideas of anti-psychiatric movements that emerged in some European countries in the mid-20th century, which suggested the deconstruction and reform of traditional psychiatry and its practices in order to implement institutional and therapeutic changes more suited to individuals with mental disorders (Gojković, 2023, p. 62). The slogan “freedom as therapy” in the Italian version of anti-psychiatric thought stemmed from demands for deinstitutionalization, which is the process of gradually closing social protection institutions and relocating their users to the community, with the provision of adequate support services to meet their specific needs and prevent further institutionalization (Gojković, 2023, p. 64).

However, a review of contemporary literature that has presented empirical data on the impact of spirituality on the mental health and behavior of detained individuals shows that religion and spirituality are associated with more favorable outcomes for people with mental disorders; that practicing religion and spirituality is linked to a lower frequency and severity of depressive episodes, while the strongest reported effect of religion and spirituality in prisons is the reduction of incidents and disciplinary sanctions (see: Eytan, 2011). Clear and Sumter conducted one of the most well-known studies of this kind, applying a religiosity scale and a prison adjustment scale to examine the impact of religion on how inmates cope with the challenges they face when entering a new environment. They discovered a connection between inmates' religiosity and their psychological adaptation to the prison environment, with inmates who reported higher levels of religiosity also reporting a higher level of adjustment (Clear & Sumter, 2002). At the same time, they concluded that the relationship between religiosity and adaptation was the result of interactions between depression, self-esteem, self-control, adaptation, and religiosity (Clear & Sumter, 2002). A particularly interesting finding was that religious inmates were less likely to report feeling as though they were in captivity compared to non-religious inmates (Clear & Sumter, 2002).

Harold G. Koenig, in a study aimed at examining the religious characteristics and backgrounds of prisoners over the age of 50 incarcerated in a U.S. federal prison, found that religious background, beliefs, activities, experiences, and intrinsic religiosity are important factors for the adjustment and behavior of older prisoners (Koenig, 1995). On the other hand, there was weak support for the connection between religiosity and positive forensic factors, such as first-time incarceration and fewer disciplinary actions (Koenig, 1995), which contrasts with later findings by Clear and Sumter. It should also be noted that old age is associated with an increased risk of somatic diseases and comorbidity with mental disorders, among which dementia and depression are predominant (Gojković, 2023a, p. 707). However, old age can bring about cognitive changes, memory changes, interpersonal changes, mood and behavioral changes, or slowed mental processes, making it difficult to determine whether they are solely due to age, psychosomatic illness (such as depression, hyperthyroidism, etc.), or are socially conditioned (Gojković, 2023a, p. 713).

Byron R. Johnson is probably the only contemporary author who consistently addresses this topic, and his studies mostly affirm the positive role of religious programs for the rehabilitation of convicted individuals. Based on this, he urges U.S. federal and state authorities to increase the presence and impact of religious programs in prisons. By researching the presence of religious programs in four correctional facilities in New York, he found that participants who attended certain programs (with an attendance of 5 to 10 sessions) showed differences in prison infractions and recidivism after one year, with these effects seeming to decrease after two or three years upon release (Johnson et al., 1997; Johnson, 2004).

Johnson and colleagues pointed out that “religious programs for prisoners are not only among the oldest but also among the most common forms of rehabilitation programs in correctional facilities today” (Johnson et al., 1997, p. 146). However, despite their widespread presence, Gerace and Day rightly observe a lack of systematic research on the connection between religious practice in prison and key rehabilitation or correctional outcomes (Gerace & Day, 2010). More theoretical and empirical attention has been given to the use of such programs during incarceration, with research typically focusing on the effects of religious programs in prison on outcomes such as institutional behavior and recidivism (Gerace & Day, 2020, p. 318).

On the other hand, for example, analyzing existing studies on the outcomes (prison infractions, recidivism, adjustment) of prisoners’ religious engagement, O’ Connor and Perryclear concluded that “few studies that

have directly examined the impact of religion on the rehabilitation of adult offenders follow a pattern that exists in the broader literature – some evidence of a statistically significant relationship between religious engagement and rehabilitation is accompanied by methodological weaknesses that leave some questions unresolved and findings uncertain” (O’ Connor & Perryclear, 2002, p. 13). While it is true that most of these studies point to a positive effect of religion and religious programs on recidivism, it is important to examine their long-term effects and to identify ways in which these programs can be optimized to provide sustainable support to convicted individuals during and after their return to the community (Gerace & Day, 2010).

As positive correlations between religious engagement and participation in religious programs in prison with favorable outcomes, both during the prison sentence and after release, are often discussed, it is important to address factors such as integration into the religious community (not just attendance), as well as how private religious beliefs interact with other social aspects (support, challenges in beliefs) and their impact on the attitudes of convicted individuals and changes in their behavior (Gerace & Day, 2010). Empirically, it has been confirmed that religion can create social networks and group ties that provide emotional support to convicted individuals and strengthen their psychological resilience (Drakeford, 2018; Gojković, 2024a). Kerley et al., analyzing survey data from a large correctional facility in the southeastern U.S., found that religiosity directly reduced the chances of frequent arguments among prisoners and indirectly lowered the likelihood of fights breaking out (Kerley, Matthews & Blanchard, 2005). Social support, in the form of support from fellow prisoners, correctional officers, but also from friends, family, and partners, is an important link that could, during incarceration, increase the capacity to cope with the stressful situation of entering and staying in prison, but also after release, by maintaining the mental health of convicted individuals (Gojković, 2024a).

Jang, Johnson, and Anderson tested the hypothesis that prisoners’ religiosity is positively related to virtues, which, in turn, are inversely related to negative emotions. They found that both public (attending religious services) and private religious behavior (praying and reading holy books) were positively associated with virtues such as forgiveness, self-control, and gratitude, while forgiveness and self-control were inversely related to pain, depression, and anxiety (Jang, Johnson & Anderson, 2023). To analyze the data from a survey of 139 men from a Colombian prison, they applied structural equation modeling (Jang, Johnson & Anderson, 2023). One of the possible explanations for the findings offered by the authors is to consider the effect of selection, since public religiosity may, to

some extent, reflect extrinsic forms of religiosity, i.e., participation in religious activities that serve other goals beyond religious beliefs, as opposed to private religiosity, which is more likely to indicate intrinsic religiosity, where faith itself is the goal (Jang, Johnson & Anderson, 2023). Examining whether religiosity in prison enhances feelings of meaning and purpose in the lives of South African prisoners (the so-called “existential effect” of religion) and whether it helps develop certain virtues (“virtue effect” of religion), Jang and Johnson found that religious prisoners reported higher levels of meaning and purpose in life, as well as gratitude and self-control, compared to those who were less religious or not religious at all (Jang & Johnson, 2020).

According to a 2012 report by the Pew Research Center’s Forum, which presented the findings of a survey of prison chaplains and religious services coordinators working in state prisons conducted in all 50 U.S. states a year earlier, state prisons are dynamic places when it comes to religious activity – not only do frequent conversions of prisoners to other faiths occur (in 77% of cases, this happens to a large extent or sometimes, mostly to Islam or Protestant Christianity), but most chaplains believe that religious counseling and other programs based on religion are an important aspect of prisoner rehabilitation (Boddie & Funk, 2012). Around 73% of chaplains believe that access to religious programs in prison is “absolutely critical” for successful prisoner rehabilitation, while 78% believe that the support of religious groups after release from prison is “absolutely critical” for the successful reintegration of former prisoners (Boddie & Funk, 2012). 62% of chaplains reported that religious programs in the prisons where they work, which are focused on rehabilitation and the reintegration of convicted individuals (faith-based training and mentoring), are available and successful, both in terms of usage and quality, which, according to 0% of respondents, has improved in recent years (Boddie & Funk, 2012). O’ Connor and Duncan investigated why the correctional system should take humanistic, spiritual, and religious identities of incarcerated individuals more seriously and do everything it can to encourage and support these identities. Meta-analytic findings from studies conducted by the American Psychological Association, along with findings from ethnographic and some recidivism studies, suggest that humanistic, spiritual, and religious pathways to understanding meaning and purpose in life can be an important part of evidence-based principles of responsivity, as well as the process of desistance from reoffending (O’ Connor & Duncan, 2011). They described the so-called Sociology of Humanistic, Spiritual, and Religious Engagement with 349 women and 3,009 men in prison in Oregon, where 25% of women and 71% of men voluntarily attended at

least one such event during their first year of incarceration – in addition to them, a broad prosocial network involving chaplains, other staff, and volunteers developed around these events. The events related to humanistic, spiritual, and religious engagement were mostly infused with various religious and spiritual traditions, such as Native American, Protestant, Islamic, Viking, Jewish, Mormon, Buddhist, and Catholic, while it is noticeable that more and more events have a secular or humanistic context, such as yoga, education, life skills development, transcendental meditation groups, and the like (O' Connor & Duncan, 2011).

Presentation of Key Findings from the Researches on the Religious Life in Prisons in Serbia

In the case of the Balkan countries, we can see how historically dominant churches developed various strategies, such as involvement in the legal and administrative management of prisoner situations, in order to adapt to new circumstances, as is the case in Romania (Kalkandjieva, 2020, as cited in Martínez-Ariño & Zwilling, 2020). Romania and Italy are examples of how, in several historically Christian prison systems, chaplains or priests are part of the institution's board, where they are authorized to assess the moral quality of prisoners and influence decisions regarding punishments and releases (Martínez-Ariño & Zwilling, 2020, p. 3). A recent study analyzing religious presence in prisons in Croatia showed that religious presence in prisons is a completely new phenomenon compared to the socialist period; that legal provisions regarding freedom of religion are respected and that all religious communities have equal access and are treated equally. The religious presence in prisons is generally ensured in a traditional way – through religious services and providing spiritual assistance in the form of prayer, confession, or conversations with religious officials (Staničić & Zrinščak, 2020, as cited in Martínez-Ariño & Zwilling, 2020).

In the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the secularization paradigm predominated – since 1945, all Yugoslav republics experienced a historical process of the declining social importance of religion and the influence of religious ideas in people's everyday lives, a process in which religious institutions, practices, and religious consciousness lost their social significance (Blagojević, 2005). However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, all socialist societies, including Yugoslavia, began to follow their post-socialist developmental paths, accompanied by social processes of re-traditionalization and de-secularization. This meant that religion's role in various areas of religious and social life was revitalized and

strengthened, not only through the “return of the sacred” and various forms of so-called postmodern religiosity but also in its traditional, institutionalized, and even conservative forms (Blagojević, 2005).

De-secularization in Serbian society began even during socialist Yugoslavia, with the liberalization of the system in the late 1980s, but this process intensified during the early stages of political pluralism and the consolidation of democratic political institutions after the October 5th changes in 2000 (Vukomanović, 2016). This period also saw numerous changes in the relationship between the state and religious communities in Serbia, with the most important among them being the revitalization of religious life, meaning that religion was no longer just a private matter but had a place in the public sphere; the adoption of a new law on religious freedoms in 2006, which changed the legal position and status of religious communities; the restoration of religious institutions and churches; religion gaining its place in public services and private media; the return of religious education in public schools; the involvement of religious communities in social work and philanthropy; and the new normative role of religious communities, including their ethical and political-symbolic functions in society (Vukomanović, 2016, p. 270). During this period, the Serbian Orthodox Church began to provide a new ideological framework for state institutions, such as the army or schools, to fill the ideological vacuum that emerged after the collapse of communism. Thus, slowly but surely, and through various forms of alliances with the state, Orthodox religion experienced a revival in the public sphere, through the media, education, the defense system, the correctional system, and so on (Vukomanović, 2016).

Lidija Radulović is the only author in Serbia who, from an ethnological and anthropological perspective, studied religion in prisons. She found that prisoners’ attitudes toward religion in Serbia primarily depend on personal preferences and motivations, with an important factor being the provision of structural conditions and an environment in which prisoners can establish or change their relationship to faith, or, if they were already religious, receive institutional support (Radulović, 2022, p. 121). She noted that a process of accommodating religious content into state institutions in Serbia, including prisons, started about fifteen years ago. The Serbian Orthodox Church, as the most representative religious organization, is the only one with prison chapels and churches (Radulović, 2022). She also emphasized that the process of institutionalizing religion in Serbian prisons is complex and has been gradual, but the entry of clergy and religious officials into prisons has led to greater visibility of religion, especially where liturgical conditions allow prisoners to participate in religious rituals.

However, this has not resulted in increased religiosity among prisoners, as is the case in the general population (Radulović, 2022, p. 123). In places where the church's institutional presence is not organized, and given that, in the last decade, support from religious organizations and churches in most Serbian prisons is often insufficient, untimely, and irregular, prisoners are forced to construct their own spirituality and engage in religious practices that are adapted to the religious conditions available (Radulović, 2022, p. 125–126). Based on an analysis of prisoners' narratives, Radulović found that, in the process of building religious individualism, religious laypersons in prisons who take on the role of surrogate priests are generally assigned the role of ritual mediators who are meant to replace the lack of a formal mediator between God and humans (Radulović, 2022, p. 126). On the other hand, the position of prisoners, their place in the social structure as outcasts from society, and the criminal structure that poses a barrier to rehabilitation – these are just some of the reasons why inmates turn to religious individualism. This manifests in them concealing their devotion to faith, praying before sleep in secret, relying solely on personal communication with God, and making efforts not to discuss it with others (Radulović, 2022, p. 126).

In most Serbian prisons, special rooms are equipped as chapels, and a few prisons have even built smaller churches. Interestingly, in the Belgrade District Prison, New Testament Bible workshops are held, where participants of various ages, educational backgrounds, and varying relationships with faith work with religious officials. The aim of these workshops is to awaken responsibility, primarily for one's own life and decisions – more specifically, to encourage those in crisis situations to reflect on what they have done and, based on that, reconsider their lives (Radulović, 2022).

This year, as part of a research project on the quality of prison life – *Assessment and Possibilities for Improving the Quality of Life for Incarcerated Individuals in the Republic of Serbia: Criminological-Penological, Psychological, Sociological, Legal, and Security Aspects* (PrisonLIFE project), a study was conducted on the religious aspects of quality of life in Serbian prisons. The goal was to identify differences in the prison experience between participants who have the opportunity to practice their religious customs, if they wish, and in accordance with the prison's house rules, and those who do not have that opportunity or choose not to practice (Milićević & Gojković, 2024, p. 71)³. Preliminary results showed a

³ The research was conducted in five correctional facilities in Serbia – the Women's Prison in Požarevac and four men's prisons in Sremska Mitrovica, Požarevac

significant correlation between the ability to practice religious customs and the quality of life in prison, as incarcerated individuals who had this opportunity had more positive perceptions of all aspects of prison life, including their overall rating (Milićević & Gojković, 2024, p. 71).

According to the data collected, 68% of the respondents stated that they are able to practice religious customs in prison, while 20% indicated they do not have this opportunity (Milićević & Gojković, 2024). The quality of life was assessed using the standardized questionnaire Measuring Quality of Prison Life (*MQPL*), which evaluates the quality of life in relation to dimensions such as harmony, professionalism, safety, living conditions in prison, contact with family, as well as well-being, welfare, and personal development (Liebling et al., 2012, as cited in Milićević & Gojković, 2024). Respondents who were able to practice religious customs rated the quality of life significantly higher (average score – 4.69) compared to those who could not (average score – 3.56), leading the authors of the study to conclude that the ability to practice religion could improve the overall quality of life for incarcerated individuals (Milićević & Gojković, 2024).

Respondents who were able to practice religious customs also rated the level of harmony higher compared to those who either did not have the opportunity or did not want to practice religious customs, as well as those who were unsure or unwilling to answer the question. This suggests that they experienced the prison environment as more humane and caring, and they also gave more favorable evaluations regarding the care and support provided to vulnerable groups of incarcerated individuals (Milićević & Gojković, 2024).

Furthermore, the research findings indicate that the transparency and accountability of the prison system appear better when the religious rights of incarcerated individuals are respected during their sentences, and that allowing religious practices may contribute to an increased sense of fairness and legality within the prison (Milićević & Gojković, 2024, p. 63). Inmates who were allowed to practice religious customs and wished to do so, rated their personal security and adaptation to prison daily life higher – meaning they felt safer in the prison where they were serving their sentence (Milićević & Gojković, 2024, p. 64). Respondents who had the ability to practice religious customs when they wished also had a more positive perception of their living conditions in prison (such as

(Zabela), Niš, and Belgrade. The sample of the research was convenient and consisted of 632 participants (86% men and 14% women). 90% of the participants identified as Christians, 4% as Muslims, and 1% as members of other religious affiliations (Milićević & Gojković, 2024).

accommodation, hygiene, and general comfort) and reported better maintenance of family connections, compared to those who did not practice religious customs (Milićević & Gojković, 2024, p. 65).

Finally, practicing religious customs in prison was associated with a higher average rating of subjective well-being, welfare, and opportunities for personal development. These inmates also gave more favorable assessments regarding their preparation for life after release, greater self-determination, and a reduction in feelings of pain, tension, and emotional disturbance (Milićević & Gojković, 2024, p. 66).

Conclusion

Research on religion and religious practices in prisons is quite rare, and the goal of this paper was to present some of the studies that highlight the positive impact that religion and religious programs have on incarcerated individuals, in order to stimulate the interest of the broader academic community in this topic. In this regard, the studies summarized in this paper primarily affirm the positive impact of religion on incarcerated individuals who are serving prison sentences, particularly on some aspects of prison life. These include mental health, adaptation to life in prison, the influence of religion, spiritual leaders, and participation in religious programs in prisons on obtaining social support and adopting prosocial values, as well as the impact of religion on preparing prisoners for life after release, i.e., rehabilitation and reintegration, which is reflected in reduced recidivism rates, and so on.

However, the other side of this research phenomenon remains unexplored or insufficiently explored, which would be interesting to investigate and present in a future study. Some of the questions raised concern whether practicing religion in prisons can also have some negative effects on incarcerated individuals; whether practicing religion in prisons is an end in itself, or whether the purpose of practicing it is the moral improvement of prisoners or just an illusion, as religion may be practiced for other, external purposes (such as obtaining certain benefits or rewards from prison staff); whether practicing religion, combined with the conditions of life in prison, can lead to negative, antisocial behaviors among prisoners; whether the overall prison atmosphere can serve as fertile ground for the emergence of distorted, deviant forms of religious behavior, such as religious extremism, fundamentalism, and affiliation with different denominations or sects; whether practicing religion in prisons can lead to mental health issues and trigger the onset of psychological disorders in

prisoners; and what the relationship between religion and affiliation with formal and informal prison systems is.

Peretti and McIntyre are among the few authors who have noted a negative relationship between religion and serving a prison sentence. In the mid-1980s, they conducted a study at the Cook County Jail in Chicago and found that participants who had been incarcerated for a year or more reported feeling as though God had abandoned them and were not willing to adhere to legally prescribed values and attitudes (Peretti & McIntyre, 1984; Gojković, 2024a). The authors observed a decline in participants' attitudes toward interaction and cooperation with others, as well as toward creating an atmosphere of trust and honesty. In addition, the respondents complained about the lack of religious coping mechanisms to deal with the unknown and with conflicts, leading the researchers to conclude that incarceration could have a negative effect on fulfilling religious functions and might even lead to personality dysfunction, as the values that participants had prior to entering prison were no longer relevant, and their motivation for certain goals was lost (Peretti & McIntyre, 1984; Gojković, 2024a).

We might agree with Jang and Johnson, who argue that while most studies on this topic show that religion improves the emotional and/or social well-being of incarcerated individuals, few studies explain how this occurs, neglecting the question of how religion can improve well-being and whether it helps men and women equally (Jang & Johnson, 2020; Gojković, 2024a). Also, as mentioned earlier in this paper, alongside existing research on the mental connection between religion and mental health in incarcerated individuals, conducting studies that consider religion as part of the family communication context for the development of schizophrenia in prisoners could lead to interesting and scientifically relevant findings.

One study showed that prisons with a majority of religious or non-religious inmates, or those with a moderate religious presence, could have different effects on the mental health of prisoners (see: Drakeford, 2018). Prisons where all inmates are religious may offer a strong religious social capital but could cause conflict or maladjustment in inmates who do not identify with those religious norms. On the other hand, prisons where all inmates are non-religious may have a lower level of religious engagement and less social support from religious communities (Drakeford, 2018). Since involvement in religious programs facilitates the building of social connections and prosocial learning through interaction with volunteer communities that serve as models for prosocial bonding and behavior, Gerace and Day argue that future research could examine how social processes and changes, group influence, and assimilation interact in the

prison religious environment (Gerace & Day, 2010). In a study by the Pew Research Center's Forum, about 40% of chaplains surveyed indicated that religious extremism in prisons is either very common or somewhat common, especially among Muslim prisoners, and rarely poses a security threat to the prisons in which they work (Boddie & Funk, 2012). In this sense, the presence of religious extremism in prisons could be an interesting research question.

Bibliography

- Abbott, P., DiGiacomo, M., Magin, P., & Hu, W. (2018). A Scoping Review of Qualitative Research Methods Used With People in Prison, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918803824>
- Baier, C., & Wright, B. (2001). If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments: A MetaAnalysis of the Effect of Religion on Crime. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 38, 3–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427801038001001>
- Beckford, J. A. (2010). The uses of religion in public institutions: the case of prisons. In A. L. Molendijk, J. Beaumont, & C. Jedan (Eds.), *Exploring the postsecular: the religious, the political and the urban. International Studies in Religion and Society* (No. 13). Brill. ISBN 9789004185449
- Beckford, J. A., & Gilliat, S. (2005). *Religion in Prison: Equal Rites in a Multi-Faith Society*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blagojević, M. (2005). Savremene religijske promene – sekularizaciona paradigma i desekularizacija. *Teme*, 29(1–2), 15–39.
- Boddie, S. C., & Funk, C. (2012, March 22). *Religion in Prisons: A 50-State Survey of Prison Chaplains*. Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/03/22/prison-chaplains-exec/>
- Bradley, D. E. (1995). Religious Involvement and Social Resources: Evidence from the Data Set 'Americans' Changing Lives. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34(2), 259–267.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1386771>
- Clear, T., & Sumter, M. (2002). Prisoners, Prison and Religion. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 35(3–4), 125–156.
https://doi.org/10.1300/J076v35n03_07
- Clemmer, D. (1958). *The Prison Community*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Dammer, H. R. (2002). Religion In Corrections. *The Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment*, 3, p. 1375.

- Dirkem, E. (1982). *Elementarni oblici religijskog života*. Prosveta.
- Drake, D., Darke, S. & Earle, R. (2015). Prison Life, Sociology of: Recent Perspectives from the United Kingdom. In J. Wright (ed.), *International Encyclopaedia of Social and Behavioural Sciences* (2nd ed.) (924–929). Elsevier.
- Drakeford, L. (2018). Mental Health and the Role of Religious Context among Inmates in State and Federal Prisons: Results from a Multilevel Analysis. *Society and Mental Health*, 9(1), 51–73.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869318763248>
- Evans, D. T., Cullen, F., Velmer Burton, R., Dunaway, G., Payne, G., & Kethineni, S. (1996). Religion, Social Bonds, and Delinquency. *Deviant Behavior*, 17(1), 43–70.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.1996.9968014>
- Eytan, A. (2011). Religion and mental health during incarceration: a systematic literature review. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 82(4), 287–295.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-011-9170-6>
- Gerace, A., & Day, A. (2010). Criminal Rehabilitation: The Impact of Religious Programming. *Journal of Psychology & Christianity*, 29(4), 317–325.
- Gojković, T. (2023). Demokratska psihijatrija u Italiji kao ideja i pokret. *Zbornik Instituta za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja*, 42(2–3), 61–73. <https://doi.org/10.47152/ziksi2023034>
- Gojković, T. (2023a). Stigmatization and Suicidal Behavior Among the Elderly Population in Serbia. In Z. Pavlović (ed.), *Elderly People and Discrimination: Prevention and Reaction* (pp. 705–722). Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research, Vojvodina Bar Association.
- Gojković, T. (2024). Specifičnosti porodica sa psihotičnim članom iz ugla sistemske porodične teorije i double-bind koncepta. *Zbornik Instituta za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja*, 43(1–2), 111–126.
<https://doi.org/10.47152/ziksi2024016>
- Gojković, T. (2024a). 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>
- Hirschi, T., & Stark, R. (1969). Hellfire and delinquency. *Social Problems*, 17(2), 202–213. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.1969.17.2.03a00050>

- Jang, S. J., Johnson, B. R., & Anderson, M. L. (2023). Virtuous effects of religion on negative emotions among offenders in a Colombian prison. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 47(2), 280–298.
- Johnson, B. R. (2004). Religious Programs and Recidivism Among Former Inmates in Prison Fellowship Programs: A Long-term Follow-up Study. *Justice Quarterly*, 21(2), 329–354.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418820400095831>
- Johnson, B. R., De Li, S., Larson, D. B., & McCullough, M. (2000). A systematic review of the religiosity and delinquency literature: A research note. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 16(1), 32–52.
- Johnson, B. R., Larson, D., & Pitts, T. (1997). Religious programs, institutional adjustment, and recidivism among former inmates in prison fellowship programs. *Justice Quarterly*, 14(1), 145–166.
- Kerley, K. R., Matthews, T. L., & Blanchard, T. C. (2005). Religiosity, religious participation, and negative prison behaviors. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44(4), 443–457.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2005.00296.x>
- Kimball, E. R. (2020). *How Receiving and Providing Relational Compensators and Religious Expectations Influence Religious Experiences* [Doctoral dissertation]. Brigham Young University. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9486&context=etd>
- Koenig, H. G. (1995). Religion and older men in prison. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 10(3), 219–230.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/gps.930100308>
- Koenig, H., Hays, J., Larson, D. B., George, L., Cohen, H., McCullough, M., Meador, K., & Blazer, D. (1999). Does Religious Attendance Prolong Survival?: A Six-Year Follow-Up Study of 3,968 Older Adults. *Journal of Gerontology*, 54(7), 370–376. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerona/54.7.m370>
- Martinez-Arino, J., & Zwillling, A. L. (Eds.) (2020). *Religion and Prison: An Overview of Contemporary Europe. (Boundaries of Religious Freedom: Regulating Religion in Diverse Societies; Vol. 7)*. Springer.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36834-0>
- Milićević, M., & Gojković, T. (2024). Religijski aspekt kvaliteta života u zatvorima u Srbiji: Preliminarni rezultati istraživanja. *Zbornik Instituta za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja*, 43(1–2), 53–76.
<https://doi.org/10.47152/ziksi2024013>
- Musick, M. A. (1996). Religion and Subjective Health Among Black and White Elders. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 37(3), 221–237.
- O' Connor, T. P., & Duncan, J. B. (2011). The Sociology of Humanist, Spiritual and Religious Practice in Prison: Supporting Responsivity

- and Desistance from Crime. *Religions*, 2(4), 590–610.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel2040590>
- O' Connor, T. P., & Perryclear, M. (2002). Prison religion in action and its influence on offender rehabilitation. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 35(3–4), 11–33. https://doi.org/10.1300/J076v35n03_02
- Opalić, P. & Ljubičić, M. (2007). Nezaobilazni sadržaji veze između magije, religije i psihijatrije. *Psihijatrija danas*, 39(1), 49–64. Medicinski fakultet, Institut za mentalno zdravlje.
- Opalić, P. (2008). *Psihijatrijska sociologija*. Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva.
- Pavićević, O., Ilijić, Lj., & Batricević, A. (2024). *Moralna i socijalna klima u zatvorima*. Institut za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja. <https://doi.org/10.47152/PrisonLIFE.D4.2>
- Peretti, P. O., & McIntyre, F. (1984). Religious Disfunctions of Incarceration. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 17(3), 177–180.
- Radoman, D. (2019). Služba zatvorskih sveštenika za pravoslavne hrišćane u Crnoj Gori od kraja 19. vijeka do 1915. godine. *PRAVO – teorija i praksa*, broj 04-06/2019, 104–113.
- Radulović, L. (2022). Religijski pluralizam u zatvorskim ustanovama u Srbiji. *Srpska politička misao*, 85(3), 115–132.
<https://doi.org/10.22182/spm.specijal32022.7>
- Regnerus, M. (2001). Making the Grade: The Influence of Religion upon the Academic Performance of Youth in Disadvantaged Communities. University of Pennsylvania. CRRUCS Report 2001–3.
- Sethi, S. & Seligman, M. (1993). The Hope of Fundamentalists. *Psychological Science*, 5(1), 58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1994.tb00616.x>
- Stark, R., Kent, L., & Doyle, D. P. (1982). Religion and Delinquency: The Ecology of a 'Lost' Relationship. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 19(1), 4–24.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/002242788201900102>
- Vukomanović, M. (2016). Srpska pravoslavna crkva, desekularizacija i demokratija. *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne*, 10, 269–279.
- Wallace, J. M., & Forman, T. A. (1998). Religion's Role in Promoting Health and Reducing the Risk Among American Youth. *Health Education and Behavior*, 25(6), 721–741.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819802500604>
- Willits, F. K. & Crider, D. M. (1988). Religion and Well-Being: Men and Women in the Middle Years. *Review of Religious Research*, 29(3), 281–294. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3511225>