From Australia

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTIANITY IN REFORMING PRISONERS

by Arthur Bolkas

Christianity and imprisonment

The relationship between Christianity and imprisonment is as old as the New Testament, with ministries to prisoners commencing from the first century of the church. Evans[1] claims The Rome House of Correction for Boys influenced English prison reformer John Howard (1777) whose writings in turn influenced the birth of the Penitentiary. However, Cromwell [2] credits American Quakers with spearheading the development of the world's first penitentiary.

Nineteenth century England's 'separate system' of incarceration drew heavily upon evangelical theology and its passionate faith in the possibility of redemption through the atonement of suffering, and the sacrifice of Christ. For evangelicals, the problem of crime was explicitly one of spiritual deterioration through the influence of a worldly and sin inducing environment from which Christ was excluded. In contrast, the less optimistic 'silent system' retained classified groups of prisoners, but banned all conversation between them. This system drew upon associationist psychology: that human attitude is learnt through interaction with environment and experience of pain/pleasure through that interaction.[3]

By the late 19th century, English penal reformers felt that the reformation of the criminal was genuinely possible and that it should be a primary objective of punishment and prison management. Advocates of the 'separate system' of prison discipline (such as Quakers and evangelicals, whose sense of the universality of sin meant that not even the vilest people was lost to God's mercy) were confident that prisoners who were subjected to continuous cellular isolation throughout a sentence, and intensively instructed, trained, educated and evangelised in their cells ' ... would emerge from prison either spiritually reborn or at least morally greatly improved.'[4]

However, there was a shortage of reformed prisons, and psychological, sociological and ethnological approaches rapidly developed. Increasingly after 1860 the idea was strongly rejected that social action of an evangelical kind would lead to substantial spiritual or moral changes within 'inferior' human beings.[5] Enthusiasm for the reformatory ideal made a brief resurgence in the late 19th century[6] and, in the form of its secular equivalent, 'rehabilitation', came to the fore again as the 'treatment' model after World War II. However, since the mid-1970s it has been in apparent demise.

Referring to the reformatory zeal of early religious prison founders in America, Todd Clear and his associates argue, 'Even today, religious programming is easily the most common and pervasive form of correctional rehabilitation available to prisoners'[7]. Moreover, Smarto [8] asserts that the decade preceding 1987 saw a massive increase in the number of religious volunteers joining prison ministries in the US - jumping from 15,000 in 1977 to 60,000 in 1987, while the number of prison ministries also increased substantially, from 214 in 1977 to 580 in 1987. In the US alone, 45,000 people have volunteered and trained to work with Prison Fellowship (PF) in some form of ministry within the criminal justice system. Founded by former Watergate prisoner, Chuck Colson, it's now the world's largest volunteer organisation involved in prison work.

Given the extent and potential benefits of Christian prison ministries (as I will later discuss), Clear *et al*.[9] express surprise that religion in prison has received so little attention from the scientific community. Concurring, O'Connor argues that despite its historical and practical role in the penal system, religion has been a neglected variable in criminal justice research, especially research on adult criminality. Indeed, it has been neglected across the social sciences.[10] Neglect of the religious variable is all the more surprising given that in Martinson's original review of 231 rehabilitation studies from 1945 to 1967, no mention was made of religion as a rehabilitative intervention. 'Thus, there seems to be a significant gap in knowledge about the role and effect of religion in the prison system'.[11] Which is particularly surprising, according to Stark,[12] in light of the evidence of a negative relationship between religion and criminality. For example, there is a negative correlation between people who attend church most frequently and involvement in crime.[13] While Stark [14] agrees that religious individuals will be less likely than those who are not religious to commit deviant acts, he argues that this is only true in communities where the majority of people are actively religious.

With the worldwide growth of prison ministries, it's clear that Christian influence in prisons persisted, arguably flourished, in the latter part of the 20th century. Indeed, Garland [15] reminds us, 'Throughout the history of penal practice religion has been a major force in shaping the ways in which offenders are dealt with'. Even today 'in a practical sense, religion is a central aspect of the modern prison system'.[16]

Before looking at Christianity's influence on prisoners, we need to consider what it means to be a religious/Christian, that is, whether or not it is possible to determine if a prisoner's faith is devout. This contentious issue is especially pertinent in a prison context where inmates who 'get religion' are often suspected of faking it, even of being deranged. (Indeed, if devoutness can be objectively determined, it would be mere speculation that the informants in my study - to follow - were Christians at all, effectively discrediting the findings.)

Allport [17] argues that degrees of religious commitment between individuals can differ greatly, and yet seem identical on such traditional measures of religiosity as frequency of church attendance. Allport distinguishes between the intrinsically religious person (who is more devout, honest, and caring) and the extrinsically religious person (whose religion is self-serving, immature, and narrow in scope). In sum: ' ... the extrinsically motivated person uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated lives his religion'.[18] It might well be, surmises Johnson[19] ' ... that many inmates do 'get religion' in prison, but that it is more likened to extrinsic rather than intrinsic religiosity.'

Clear et al.[20] found the notion of Intrinsic-Extrinsic orientations extremely useful in characterising the religious 'meanings' encountered in their prison study. However, their best attempts to actually measure religiousness were ultimately flawed, the authors largely attributing this to religiousness being a 'complex multidimensional construct about which there is little consensus'.[21] As a result, the authors conclude, their attempts to identify the devout prisoner - to distinguish between what inmates referred to as 'sincere' (respected) and 'insincere' (scorned) religious inmates - are disappointing because, to the extent that inmates' self-reports are limited measures, their measure of religiosity is correspondingly flawed.[22]

Within Christendom, intrinsic-extrinsic religious orientations appear to have widespread currency. In evangelical terms, for instance, the intrinsically religious person is more likely to have undergone a genuine spiritual conversion

or have been 'born again.' According to Silverman and Oglesby [23] (authors of a unique study on the 'new birth' phenomenon amongst prisoners), the experience of coming into touch with 'reality beyond realities' is commonly preceded by a process of intense inner conflict leading to a breakdown of resistance to God. This is partly attributed to the view that most penal institutions are 'dehumanising, authoritarian, oppressive, bleak, dangerous places'. However, for the inmate, beyond the institutional problems, there are many psychological issues that cannot be ignored. These include: loss of personal identity; alienation from one's previous society/family; sense of failure; sense of one's finitude; overwhelming personal guilt, and loss of personal mythology when the prisoner's life becomes an open book via the news media, and he/she is exposed as the 'sinner' that he/she is.

Dissonance and tension in a convert's life [24] may result from neglecting what Silverman and Oglesby refer to as the 'process of working through'. These authors contend that as with any therapeutic change in a person, there is an 'affective experience' followed by 'a process of 'working through',' which 'is essential if the religious experience is to be enduring.' This process is marked by prayer, communion, confessions, study, and Christian fellowship as reinforcers of the experience. Out of this can come recognition of responsibility in a covenant relationship, with discipline and obedience. If the convert can accept these as outcomes and not some magical disappearance of tribulation, and can accept that prayer does not give immediate, or for that matter, even the wished for answer, then the experience has the makings of an enduring one. Deliverance is not to be construed in a physical sense, but only in a spiritual way.[25]

Mindful of this crucial process, Colson says:

> *'Sometimes in our Christian literature and preaching we make conversion seem like instant sanctification, as if simply at the name 'Jesus' and at the snapping of one's fingers a person is converted from a hardened criminal into a saint. It just doesn't work like that. The truth is that conversion may occur in an instant, but the process of coming from sinfulness into a new life can be a long and arduous journey'.*[26]

In one respect, then, conversion is a means to an end (the beginning of a new way of life), rather than an end in itself. But the longer and deeper one has been immersed in 'sinfulness,' as many prisoners have, arguably the

more difficult it is to extricate oneself. For such people the working through process (which includes a Christian support network, among other things) is essential both during imprisonment and, especially, post-release.

Religion and prisoners/former prisoners: contemporary findings

Before looking at my own findings, I want to assess other contemporary findings. Overall, they reflect favourably on prisoners who engage in religious activities and/or consider themselves religious.

Despite their seemingly hopeless predicament, Peck [27] found a positive correlation between religiously inspired hope and coping among habitual offenders faced with a prison sentence of life without parole. Peck concludes that religious salience may facilitate a 'maturing out' process and have a positive effect on inmates' psychological well-being. Indeed, he says 'hope grounded in a religious orientation may be the means to survival'.[28]

The most comprehensive research on religion in prison is that by Professor Clear and his associates in 1992, entitled *Prisoners, Prisons and Religion.* The authors reported that 'religious participation can help an inmate overcome the depression, guilt, and self contempt that so often accompanies the prison sentence', and to ameliorate the harsh environment of the prison (which includes a lack of safety, material comforts and heterosexual contact). Further, the study found that inmates who participated in prison religious services, or considered themselves religious, adjusted better to prison life, having fewer disciplinary problems and infractions.[29] Religion also offers inmates a new way of life in which the failures of the past can be totally replaced by a 'new, fully developed way of living'. It can also give prisoners a sense of inner peace to help them deal with the trauma of prison life, especially the obvious one: loss of freedom.[30]

As with anything that holds out rehabilitative promise in prison, a general expectation is that the ultimate 'test' of religious faith will occur when an inmate is returned to the community. Faith-based rehabilitation programmes like APAC (an acronym for the Portuguese '*Amando ao Preso, Amando ao Cristo*' - Loving the Prisoner, Loving Christ), Prison Fellowship Discipleship Seminars, and Detroit TOP (Transition Of Prisoners) have made impressive claims about the post-release outcomes of their program participants. On the other hand, recruiting prisons that had strong PF Ministry programmes, Clear et al.[31] also proposed a follow-up study to assess the relationship between in-prison religious activity and post-release adjustment. Professor

Clear informed me that a preliminary telephone interview with ex-prisoners (approximately half) indicated poor church attendance (among other things) and raised negative speculation regarding their likely outcomes.[32] According to Forsythe,[33] although many referred to spiritual progress made in society, others seemed to be losing the struggle when alone and unaided in the world. Moreover, many of the above-mentioned PF programme participants also 'failed' post-release.

In discussing community reintegration of prisoners (Christian or otherwise) it is important to remember the impact release has upon them. The 'ex' will have emerged from a predominantly deviant culture; at worst, one in which processes of criminalisation and 'prisonisation' have been assimilated to the degree that a prison sentence results not in a new and improved law-abiding citizen, but one who has crystallised his thinking about his deviant lifestyle and has become a 'better criminal'.[34] Even if institutional treatment is successful, its effects will quite possibly dissipate once the offender returns to society. Programmes may alleviate some 'pains of imprisonment'[35] and foster better prison adjustment, yet life in the free community is an entirely different matter. A good prisoner, therefore, may not necessarily make for a good citizen (according to the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals 1973). While many prisoners return to society sincerely believing that they will not offend again, their good intentions are soon overwhelmed by the same set of personal and social problems that contributed to their offence in the first place.[36]

If the transition from captivity to freedom is a daunting one for prisoners generally, arguably it can be more so for the Christian who is released. To a person who is struggling on 'the outside,' Christian support may mean the difference between going on and giving up. Smarto [37] contends that the church can be a spiritual home for a new and growing Christian ex-convict who 'needs spiritual oversight, a place of worship, a loving community, encouragement, and prayer just as all believers do.' (It is unfortunate, he adds, that 'many churches are eager to minister by mail and visitation but feel reluctant to encourage ex-prisoners to join their church'). However, in addition to spiritual care, practical support must extend to the problem areas outlined above by Wood.[38] In Smarto's words, a 'holistic approach' is required, one that tends the mental, physical, and spiritual needs of the prisoner, as 'attention of any one factor to the neglect of the others reduces the effectiveness of reform.' Prison visitation,

correspondence, evangelistic efforts, Bible studies - all can therefore end in failure if a released prisoner (and his/her family) does not receive this vital element of after care from the church.[39]

In regard to establishing and developing prisoners' faith, past studies have clearly reflected the importance of religious programming. Founded by David Phillipy, the best-known programme devised to integrate Christian teaching and values into inmate behaviour is Prison Fellowship's In- Prison Seminar Programme. When he was a chaplain at Tennessee State Penitentiary, Phillipy observed a number of inmates experience some form of conversion to the Christian faith. For some, he claimed, conversion led to important changes in their lives, even enabling them to stay out of prison. On the other hand, the conversion experience of other inmates did not lead to personal change; while professing the faith, they continued to engage in antisocial behaviour that caused them to return to prison. According to Phillipy, while the inmate exposed only to religious teaching might benefit, it appeared that some converted inmates required ongoing instruction that had to be integrated in order for them successfully to live-out their new faith.

Phillipy [40] believed that 'inmates who change have integrated their religious beliefs into their personalities in a holistic way. Those who do not change compartmentalize the religious experience, failing to integrate it into their thinking, feelings and behaviour.' He attempted to address this problem by developing a Bible study designed to integrate Scripture into the thinking, feelings and behaviour of inmates - a model that presents scriptural readings in ways that increase their functional values in real life situations.

APAC is a biblically based correctional programme that provides prisoners with multiple opportunities for religious training, education, fellowship and worship within a Christian environment. It was originally established in Humaita Prison, Brazil in the 1970s and operates today in more than 40 other prisons throughout that country. (Humaita Prison is unique in that it has been operated by PF volunteers on principles involving a high level of prisoner trust and responsibility, and claims a recidivism rate of less than four per cent.) Christ-center core programmes emphasise prisoners' need for restoration with their families, communities, and the Lord. This three-phase programme begins while prisoners are still in prison, involving them in 18 to 24 months of pre-release programming, and then extends into the community for an additional six to 12 months of after care.

A recent study by Johnson [41] revealed that Humaita program participants recidivated at a rate of 16 per cent, significantly lower than Brazil's national average (estimated at 50-70 per cent). Could one possible deduction be that, unlike their forebears, these Christian prison administrators have managed better to align their theory of reformative imprisonment (in a sense, the penitentiary ideal revisited) with practice?

The implications are certainly interesting, especially in light of Stark's thesis, that basically endorses the concept of a 'Christian run' prison. According to Stark,[42] what counts is not whether a particular person is religious, but whether this religiousness is, or is not, 'ratified by' the social environment. 'Put another way, it may be of little consequence that a given inmate 'finds' religion in prison unless this also involves or is followed by immersion in a like-minded group'.[43]

Opened in 1993, arguably the most significant PF Ministries program is Detroit TOP, a transition support program aimed at reducing the level of recidivism among select moderate to high-risk African- American prisoners. In their final evaluation report of TOP, the Centre for Social Research concluded:

> *'Prison Fellowship has conceived and successfully implemented a unique program model that, though needing work, is providing a valuable and much needed service to the community and to the ex-prisoners who truly participate in the program'.*[44]

In summary, previous studies of prison religion have shown mixed findings: on the one hand providing prisoners with religious inspired hope, meaning and purpose in life, a sense of forgiveness of sins and inner peace, better adjustment to prison, and possible reform/rehabilitation; on the other hand suggesting that, compared to being incarcerated, offenders generally find it harder to live-out their faith after they are released - all reflecting my beliefs about and experiences of these matters.

A former insider's inside view

My own study was inspired by personal experience of imprisonment (1977-1983), my prison conversion, and similar religious experiences reported by fellow inmates (and observed by me). A feature common to all (and something I anticipated in the interviews I conducted with prisoners and ex-prisoners) was both the distinctive nature of the experience and the individual's religious zeal. For these prisoners, faith had 'intrinsic' rather than utilitarian value. It was often costly and, despite obstacles and setbacks, usually endured, even beyond release.

Becoming a Christian was a defining event in my life and had far-reaching implications in and beyond prison. Although community reintegration was difficult, I persevered in faith, and I largely attribute my rehabilitation to that fact. Mindful of the fact that convicts continue to embrace religious faith and that prison seems unable to reform offending behaviour, I investigated what difference Christianity made to prisoners' lives.

I sought to investigate the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of Christian prisoners and former prisoners, especially with regard to how religion is used to attach meaning to and organise their lives (and how this in turn influences their actions). For this purpose qualitative methods have been applied; my research is essentially a phenomenological study based on field experience involving, primarily, semi-structured interviews, observation and participant observation, several case studies, and informal conversations. These strategies were adopted because they allowed me to learn about informants' social world at first-hand.

Having spent a considerable portion of my life in prison and having become a Christian there, I was able 'to take the role of the actor and see his world from his standpoint'.[45] Indeed, the focus of many interview questions in my study reflected my 'informed' insights and theoretical assumptions on particular topics.

The only 'evidence' this study provides of the reformatory aspects of Christianity is through informants' personal testimonies. The argument that self-reports may constitute a weakness in method because of their subjective/limited nature, whilst generally true, holds less currency given that this 'qualitative researcher is not primarily geared to finding out the truth per se but rather the truth as the informant sees it to be'.[46]

In the initial stages of my research, a matter of serious concern was the deliberate obstruction I encountered via some 'gatekeepers' - 'those individuals in an organization that have the power to withhold access to people or situations for the purposes of research'.[47] First, the operations manager of a regional prison (who'd known me as a prisoner) publicly snubbed me at reception saying, 'I don't want an ex-crim in here.' Embarrassed and offended, I momentarily felt like a prisoner again. Although I could not be officially denied access, it was limited to strictly controlled interviews. This effectively stopped the further use of 'participatory

observation' as a research method. Consultation with the CEO (public correctional system) resulted in an apology and permission to contact additional interviewees to whom I had been denied access.

The second incident involved a private women's prison. The original research design included participation at religious events and interviews with female prisoners. Midway through this process, misconduct was alleged against me, resulting in revocation of my visiting privileges. An offer for me to correspond with informants was declined, resulting in females being eliminated from the study. Unsuccessful attempts to meet with management over these allegations left me feeling my right of due process had been denied. (Even as a prisoner, 'Governor's Court' would have been my entitlement.) Under the circumstances, then, it was tempting to believe that the discrimination I felt in both instances was somehow linked to my past.

However, my research proceeded. The study comprised 60 adult male informants - 45 current prisoners (including 28 paedophiles) and 15 former prisoners (three paedophiles). The average informant was a single, white Australian, working class, middle-aged male recidivist, serving a long custodial sentence for violent crimes - often sex offences against children. However, by comparison, few ex-prisoners were sex offenders, and they had spent an 'encouraging' length of time outside of prison.

The criminal-Christian paradox

Two-thirds of informants said they became Christians before their imprisonment, of whom 62.5 per cent were paedophiles and 37.5 per cent were general offenders. Of the remaining third that acquired faith after entering prison, 30 per cent were paedophiles and 70 per cent were general offenders. And of the entire population just eight men reported no church/ Christian background whatsoever - 87 per cent indicating some religious background, even if only slight. Eleven of 40 informants who acquired faith pre-imprisonment had always been Christians. However, the experience even of those who said they had 'never known anything else' was not without problems and failings. This may explain the high number of informants overall (17 of 40, which includes at least four that had always been Christians) who claimed to have become, or were in the process of becoming, 'genuine' Christians only after their arrest and/or imprisonment. I heard accounts of sincerely committed teenagers who had gradually drifted away from Christianity; of spiritual confusion, struggles, and lapsed faith; of life-

threatening accidents (and other crises) bringing men to faith; and the sudden realisation that one's 'faith' was not real. In the face of a crisis, a feature common to the men's stories was the vital help of other Christians vis-à-vis their life/faith - and the providence of God.

For many of the 20 prison converts the processes leading to conversion were similar to those outlined above. The lifestyles of a few 'career criminals' effectively excluded religious activity. Indeed, six people converted in prison said they had no Christian background whatsoever. Prison converts also strongly agreed that other Christians (prisoners and outsiders) had significantly influenced their lives. Whereas informants generally felt their time in prison was spiritually profitable, notably more prison converts than pre-existing Christians reported some kind of transforming supernatural experience after being arrested/incarcerated.

Hence the people in this study tended to be Christians prior to entering prison - paedophiles making up most of these, but comprising fewer prison converts than mainstream prisoners. This raised the question of how pre-existing Christians reconciled ending up in prison with being Christian beforehand; the assumption being that Christianity-criminality are irreconcilable.

A pattern emerged: 'I believed I was a Christian but ... my faith ... was in my head but not in my heart', said one informant. Another said he was a 'quasi-type Christian on the outside ... ' who had nominal faith or who had not fully appropriated faith in his heart. These were men claiming to have been genuinely converted after their arrest/imprisonment. Some claimed their offences had occurred before they became Christians - one man as long as 25 years earlier.

Other pre-existing Christians had previously been young/immature, impressionable, insecure, and so distraught about conflicting beliefs/behaviour that they felt confused about their faith or disqualified from being Christians. Still others believed one could remain a Christian notwithstanding wilful disobedience to God - after all a Christian was still a free-thinking, responsible moral agent. Certainly in the 'battle of the flesh against the spirit' many related to a 'backslider's' compromised faith. While nobody suggested that 'the devil made me do it', some felt he contributed to their downfall.

Offending behaviour was mainly attributed (by paedophiles, 16) to unresolved psychosexual problems including: marriage difficulties, loneliness and depression, retarded sexual development/identity, repressed sex drive/needs, pornography, and childhood sexual abuse.

The phenomenon of 'dual identity' was particularly intriguing. 'Officially, I was ... a preacher; I was living a great lie ... I was two different people living two different kinds of lives'. Or as one inmate starkly put it: 'There must be a Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in all of us ... ' There was a tendency to block out offences, or at least to minimise and justify them in one's mind. Certainly, the need to address both spiritual and psychological problems was stressed.

Informants felt that facing excessive problems without sufficient support from Christians also contributed to their downfall. In some cases requested help was unavailable either before or after offending; on the other hand help was resisted through shame or fear of exposure/reprisals, driving one even further down. Criminality was also described as impulsive/ uncharacteristic: a domestic dispute hitting flashpoint. Some paedophiles claimed mental blanks had impaired recollection of (alleged) offences; others professed innocence or guilt to lesser charges, or admitted selfishness simply overrode consideration for victims and the consequences. Still others explained their inclination towards children rather than adults on bad experiences with adults, or considered children easy/attractive targets.

Whereas most informants were ostensibly Christians preimprisonment, the findings suggest that they were 'extrinsically' religious, not devout - the nominalism commonplace among churchgoers. That such people might have come to 'real' faith via the means described is not extraordinary. However, the fact that 62.5 per cent were convicted paedophiles presents another possible scenario: evil men drawn to churches to prey on children. The truth of this was not disputed; some offenders admitted as much themselves. But was it the only explanation?

My findings showed that at least some paedophiles genuinely struggled to reconcile faith-offending in the community, seemingly caught in a kind of moral tug-of-war between 'flesh and spirit.' Variously confused and immature, racked with temptation, guilt, and other psychosexual problems, is it not conceivable that one could be both paedophile and earnest believer?

Without clear evidence to the contrary, and setting personal prejudice aside, I suggest that the testimony of these people should not be cynically dismissed. Certainly, an imperative rests on the wider Christian community both to believe and help them given that all Christians are sinners, according to doctrine, and thereby prohibited from judging others.

Prisoners' faith: positives and negatives

Eighty-three percent of informants said their prison experience was positive overall; 12 per cent had struggled, trying to work through personal/faith issues; and only two informants said it was negative. Going to prison had clearly enhanced not hindered the faith of preexisting Christians; the hostile prison environment partly accounting for this. In a sense reflecting the 19th century penitential ideal, it is precisely when the individual has nothing left, and is most vulnerable, that he may truly apprehend and rely upon God. However, the findings (reinforced elsewhere) also suggest that few prisoners were able to sustain their faith alone. Christian support within/outside prison was crucial to long-term, positive outcomes - especially for seven prisoners who had badly struggled with their faith. (It is worth noting that of these seven all had long prison sentences, four were paedophiles, all three marriages were in trouble, and five had some kind of Pentecostal background.)

To determine the effect of faith on their lives, informants were asked: Does being a Christian make any (positive/negative) difference to your life in prison? In what ways? The majority (93 per cent) said faith had had a positive effect on their lives overall. In a general sense, more than anything faith/God was said to provide (spiritual and practical) hope, help, and strength to cope with imprisonment. Among the most significant outcomes of faith was self-control, particularly in a violent 'dog-eat-dog' culture where restraint was extremely difficult. Faith also positively affected one's moral outlook re sex and drug use/dealing.

In a demoralising situation, faith offered something to believe in and live for. According to informants, unlike most inmates, Christians were optimistic about their prison sentences and life post-release. For long-term prisoners, especially, one's philosophical view of time could be crucial. Faith also offered an alternative lifestyle, one resistant to the inmate code. It was more fulfilling as it guarded against prevailing apathy and aimlessness.

Having God to rely upon provided a sense of safety, even invincibility, which was complemented by the support of other Christians. As a result, despite facing enormous pressures, Christians were reportedly more relaxed and at peace. Composure, patience; a sense of mental ease and inner freedom were all attributed to Christian faith. Being a Christian positively affected the way prisoners felt about themselves as they learned to overcome fears and insecurities and to develop strength of character. Indeed, without faith at least 14 prisoners doubted they would have survived prison unscathed, most suggesting they would/might have committed suicide.

Christianity also enhanced pre-existing relationships, helped establish new ones, and assisted general relating with prisoners/staff. Faith provided the patience, tolerance and wisdom to effectively deal with other people, many of whom were problematic and difficult. Faith also engendered respect, compassion, and support for others - even 'untouchables' and enemies.

Receptacles of human misery and pathos, prisons are depressing, degrading, dangerous places where survival is paramount. For the prisoners in my study, survival equated to faith in God, which provided the hope for them to cope with imprisonment - especially those who had already served long sentences, with years remaining.

Law-abiding prisoners

In the highly regimented prison environment, prisoners' traditional enemies are 'screws'. Representing the human face of a bureaucratic system deemed cruel and unjust, prison officers are usually regarded with contempt by 'crims,' resulting in reluctant compliance with prison rules. However, 88 per cent of informants said their faith had positively affected their attitude towards the authorities and prison rules.

They were reportedly more helpful, honest, understanding, and civil vis-à-vis authorities, and had greater patience, tolerance, and self-control. Respecting (or at least accepting) authority made for more compliant, law-abiding prisoners, which, in turn, might attract officers' trust and favour. Occasionally, rapport developed even to the point (unacceptable by prison standards) of friendship. In spite of being mistreated by prison officers, some men even prayed for them. A further 62 per cent of informants said they had not been charged or in trouble with the authorities/other prisoners, and believed that they were generally better behaved and less troublesome than their non-Christian counterparts. (Apart from traffic fines, 85 per cent of exprisoners said they had not offended or been in trouble with the authorities since their release.)

Still, for all the positive implications of prison religion, Christians were a minority group who faced possible opposition from other inmates and staff. According to informants, non-Christian prisoners and officers alike generally viewed Christian prisoners with contempt and suspicion - the attitude even of some prison authorities was questionable. The outcome? Victimisation.

Christians were allegedly abused, vilified, obstructed, discriminated against, intimidated and assaulted because of their faith - some became veritable prison martyrs. Out of concern for what others might think/say and do, informants believed that prison life could cause religious faith to be compromised.

The unfortunate irony here is that offenders may have been persecuted at a time when they were genuinely trying to reform themselves, possibly causing their faith to be undermined as a result. While such behaviour is endemic among prisoners and hence not easily controllable, it should definitely not be countenanced from prison staff.

My findings show also that a prisoner's Christian faith generally had a salutary effect on relationships with family members/friends. This is especially encouraging given that many relationships had preexisting problems and/or were damaged by pressures associated with imprisonment. In many ways marriage was the greatest beneficiary and casualty: on the one hand pre-existing rifts were healed following a prisoner's religious turnaround; on the other hand Christian marriages broke down in prison and post-release.

My own experience confirms the limited data that suggests relationships formed in prison (or soon after) were most vulnerable, generally being superficial and idealistic in nature. How is it possible, after all, to maintain a healthy relationship under wholly unnatural circumstances? And, as I'll argue later, post-release reintegration difficulties are likely to further undermine such relationships - not to mention unresolved personal issues and problems with church assimilation.

However, according to 91 per cent of informants, religion affected values and morals. Asked what they wanted to do with the rest of their lives informants said they desired to grow in faith and honour God's standards over the world's, inter alia, through evangelism, Bible study, and serving God/others. Indeed, contributing back to society/helping others was the single greatest response, especially via Christian prison ministry or some other prison/post-prison related work.

Faith provided not only new standards, but also the means to (begin to) achieve them - and helped previously unattainable ones to be realised. A new moral outlook, greater insight, honesty, and determination - all undergirded by God's spirit - led to a renewed way of thinking and living.

It was as if a moral 'revolution' had transformed offenders' lives. To underscore the point, this was an actual way to live life complete with instructions and advice. However, as earlier findings indicate, the process of coming from sinfulness into a new life can be a difficult journey, arguably hardest for those entrenched deeply in sinfulness.

Old instincts, habits, thinking patterns, environments - all served to undermine a 'new lifestyle', highlighting the importance of a Christian support network in reinforcing positive change among prisoners and former inmates. The present findings revealed inadequate supports and a corresponding pattern of progression-regression among informants - moral precepts became tortuous ideals for those battling to uphold them.

Experiencing dissonance about compromised principles, they tried to persevere in the knowledge that faith was an ongoing process of repentance over sin. Arguably their biggest stumbling block was guilt.

Guilt, forgiveness, rehabilitation

Feeling condemned by the general and Christian public alike (and within prison) it is not surprising that informants (especially paedophiles) experienced guilt. However, they were not crippled by guilt; more than half said they felt forgiven for their crimes/sins and good about themselves. In this regard Clear et al.[48] suggest two ways that prisoners can turn to religion to relieve guilt: the first is a kind of exculpatory acceptance of the workings of evil in the world; the second is atonement and forgiveness.

Reinforcing Clear's findings, I found that religious inmates generally did not adopt an exculpatory view of their guilt – even paedophiles who had themselves been sexually abused as children tended to accept personal responsibility for their crimes and for the wrongfulness of their conduct. Arguably, however, religion's effectiveness in dealing with guilt can only be truly tested postrelease and in the long-term. What might one's reaction be to a possible moral lapse or crisis in faith when coping mechanisms learned in prison fail against pressures unique to society? Furthermore, if all-important self-forgiveness is best experienced through offender/victim reconciliation, one has to question the extent to which guilt can be addressed, given the unlikelihood of such reconciliation occurring either in prison or the community.

Certainly the number of prisoners who struggled to forgive themselves because of what they had done highlights the need for prison and post-prison 'guilt resolution' counselling services. Whereas it could be said that these men had not been properly converted or grasped the significance of atonement in their lives, a further possible explanation (particularly given the complex issues surrounding paedophilia) is that they had (often deep-seated) unresolved psychosexual- spiritual problems.

A premise of my study is that Christianity helps to reform/rehabilitate prisoners. In response to the proposition: One of the stated aims of imprisonment is to rehabilitate offenders, 75 per cent of informants responded negatively. According to one category of response, rehabilitation was said to be an idealistic notion that did not exist in practice. Others thought rehabilitation was something you did for yourself – motivation to change a prerequisite. Still others believed faith/Christianity was integral to the process. Lastly, some argued that the negative environment of prison precluded rehabilitation, although imprisonment possibly provided time for introspection.

Asked whether they had received professional help/treatment for their offending behaviour, 44 per cent of informants said they had not. Whereas all mainstream prisoners reported getting some kind of professional assistance, more than half the paedophiles did not, either because services were insufficient or unavailable. Although many paedophiles wanted therapy, they complained that prison authorities delayed their access to the few available programmes because they had not served enough of their sentences (several received help from alternative sources). Moreover, 67 per cent of those who received professional assistance considered it inadequate.

Having rejected the proposition that imprisonment rehabilitates, informants were asked whether they thought Christianity was a way of rehabilitating prisoners. All but one answered 'yes'. However, some gave qualified assent, saying Christianity would benefit only truly devout offenders committed to live it out/change. And they emphasised the need for ongoing discipleship and pastoral care. Further, Christianity was said to have rehabilitative potential provided one's practical needs were also met, especially post-release. Unless personal/psychological issues were addressed, warned some paedophiles, Christianity risked becoming a way of avoiding problems.

My findings were unequivocal: imprisonment per se does not rehabilitate criminals. Informants believed that rehabilitative initiatives were simply not supported and encouraged enough. An indication of this was the large number of paedophiles who, despite being incarcerated awhile, had not received professional 'treatment' at the point of interview. In my opinion it is questionable practice to place high-risk sex offenders who are committed to change on a therapeutic 'waiting list'.

According to my findings, rehabilitative regimes should be intensive, extensive, and voluntary. However, existing services were also inadequate according to service users, critical of both the quantity and quality of

programming and personnel. A particular criticism was professionals' intolerance of paedophiles who supposedly 'used' religion to avoid dealing with their problems. Authorities must remain alert to this but receptive to a 'holistic' approach to inmate care wherein health therapy and religious services and practices work together to help prisoners.

The research findings suggest Christian inmates (paedophiles in particular) feel greater personal security, and in turn confidence to practise their faith, in an environment that is tolerant, respectful, and addresses 'holistic' needs. Arguably the most conducive possible environment is a Christian-run facility. Engaged in Christian programming amidst like-minded, supportive people, offenders ' rehabilitation prospects would probably increase. Given the level of specialisation/privatisation in modern penal systems, the prospect of housing Christian offenders in this way in not untenable. In principle, the majority of informants agreed.

Behind bars and outside

Both the literature and my findings concur that support from other Christians is vital to Christian prisoners. While Christian friends/family, churches, and fellow inmates are important in this regard, prison chaplains and volunteers are arguably prisoners' most significant support base - presumably they are familiar with prison and prisoners' needs, equipped to help, and accessible.

My findings suggest chaplains and volunteers had a significant influence over convicts' lives. Providing a mix of pastoral and practical care to needy prisoners and their families, they were among the few normalising influences. With a mandate to love and serve society's 'outcasts,' these Christians represented a benevolent presence to people who had often reached their lowest emotional and spiritual point. Offering hope amidst hopelessness and meaning in despair, they were soul mates and 'life-savers' to many. Primarily for these reasons, chaplains and volunteers were generally well regarded and their activities well attended.

However, my findings also indicate significant failings in service provision. Neither chaplaincy nor volunteer agencies could meet the demand for religious services (limited Bible studies a prime example). The most pro-active and popular of all organised religious activities, there were simply insufficient resources to provide Bible studies on a regular and uniform basis - the primary deficiency being people. Indeed, Christian personnel were conspicuous by their absence or, paradoxically, excessively busy even

when 'available.' In my opinion the likely outcome of the above for existing personnel is an onerous and unrealistic workload: burn out and attrition - and for religious inmates: disillusionment, cynicism, and possible dissonance in converts impeded in the process of 'working through'.

Chaplains especially were in a catch-22. Arguably more underresourced and overworked than volunteers, and accountable to both prisoners and gaol/church authorities, inevitably their credibility had to suffer - which was reflected in informants' stated preference for volunteers over chaplains. However, another possible interpretation is that factors other than workplace efficiency and success determined one's ultimate worth. Certainly, informants believed few chaplains or volunteers met the criteria of a good Christian prison worker. Those who did were exceptional human beings; genuine, caring people who sacrificially embraced prisoners as friends and equals. This quality distinguished fellow 'brother/sister' from 'professional' Christian - which prisoners were quick to discern. Unconditional acceptance in turn attracted trust, essential for effective ministry.

Informants were asked whether, compared to other Christians, it would be useful having ex-prisoners helping in and outside prison. Considered better able to relate than others, it was strongly agreed that the contribution of ex-prisoners would enhance prison and post prison ministry. Which raises the question why only two ex-prisoners (to my knowledge) are actively involved in Christian prison ministry, and why past Bible studies (organised by ex-prisoners for themselves or by support groups) have failed.

Those who had been in prison before said prisoners often had good intentions to 'go straight', but ended up in trouble after being released. Long-term inmates (especially prone to institutionalisation) described a form of 'social retardation' wherein inappropriate behaviour/response patterns and coping mechanisms led to social ineptitude:

> *'In the prison environment ... I sort've felt quite confident about myself ... and then you sort've come out here and come into another environment and it disillusions you ... you sort've have to really question, 'Well where do I fit in here? I knew where I fitted in there, and I knew my role in there,' and so ... it challenges your identity.'*

Emotional immaturity, self-consciousness, paranoia, anger and fear; difficulty relating to and trusting others, loneliness and alienation (even from family/friends) - to varying degrees this was the experience of released prisoners.

Relationships, arguably the most stabilising influence when in prison, were often unsettling post-release. How was the role of father, husband, or boyfriend to be resumed (or assumed for the first time) after a long absence? Not surprisingly, ex-prisoners married prematurely and experienced high rates of relationship breakdown. Finances, accommodation, employment, education, food, clothing, company - after depending on others for these in prison one was suddenly expected to be self-sufficient. Making matters worse, anticipated help was sometimes not forthcoming.

The stigma of having been in prison was another terrible burden, especially for those (paedophiles mainly) alleging public/media vilification, (police) harassment and abuse. Faced with such difficulties, it is understandable that former prisoners considered it a major problem that they had inadequate (or non-existent) support networks. Many found it hard, even impossible, to discuss problems or request/receive help, highlighting the need for (more effective) pre-release preparation. Through alienation and loneliness some people engaged with 'bad' though familiar company.

In addition to social reintegration, released Christian prisoners (both with and without church backgrounds) faced the potentially daunting challenge of church assimilation. Whereas most prisoners proposed to attend a church/fellowship outside of prison, proportionately few ex-prisoners actually attended. Even churchgoers were inconsistent - church 'hopping' was commonplace. Disillusioned with mainstream denominations, some opted for 'home' churches; others struggled to attend at all. Those most involved in church life tended to have supportive Christian friends/families.

About half the prisoners (excluding those previously released as Christians) anticipated problems fitting into church post-release. This reflected the actual experience of former prisoners (and those released as Christians but who re-offended) - 47 per cent saying they did encounter problems with church assimilation:

> *'I found it pretty difficult at first to try and fit into church life because I acted very differently, or more-or-less I…felt so different coz've my experience and my character and nature and… the things I used t'joke about, and being with people who were very clean…I never quite knew how I came across.'*

'I'd never been to church, and I started goin' to church ... it was absolutely terrifying, and also paranoia set in ... I had people ... putting their arm around me and saying, 'Oh how are you today ... ?' ... and in the back've my mind the old thinking was still there: 'Whadda they want? Why are these people being nice to me for?'

'One particular person resented my whole family…wanted nothing to do with us ... wouldn't even sit within the church if we were there ... She didn't know what I'd been in for ... only knew that I was an ex-crim.'

The most common criticism of church was its failure to help when most needed: namely, after arrest, religious conversion or, especially, after one's imprisonment. Instead of getting support, informants often felt ostracised and abandoned. And when help (such as counselling) was offered, Christians tended to 'spiritualise' problems, intent on 'soul saving' at the expense of follow-up/ discipleship - some Christians allegedly even ignoring (suspected) serious offending behaviour. Churchgoers were also accused of being hypocritical, selfrighteous, closed-minded, superficial, unreliable, autocratic, and unapproachable.

The combination of difficulties experienced post-release caused informants to struggle more with their faith in the community compared to when they were in prison. Without Christian supports and the familiar routine of prison, and facing greater responsibilities in the community, one risked becoming distracted and complacent vis-à-vis religious issues. Vulnerability to temptations could be a terrible scourge, particularly if one returned to society with unresolved problems/addictions and maintained 'bad' company. Ultimately, it was a case of faith being truly tested only after exposure to the 'real world'; a non-idealised world where ' ... you can end up falling away so subtly that you don't realise it until you have fallen away'.

In regard to the progress of their faith after being released, some informants had continued to grow through church attendance, personal devotions, and involvement in Christian/welfare work. Having earlier been zealous Christians actively engaged in ministry, others' faith had mellowed over time. Still others said their faith had undergone re-evaluation/modification, or having been weakened, needed strengthening.

Likewise, prisoners anticipated that chaplains and volunteers would be important to them after their release. Ex-prisoners also believed that maintaining post-release contact was vital, especially for those without adequate support. Indeed, both prisoners and ex-prisoners strongly believed that prison workers' responsibility should include post prison follow-up. Who, after all, could better appreciate their difficult transition-reintegration process? Familiar and trusted, ideally friends, it was felt that chaplains/ volunteers should help to establish interested ex-prisoners in suitable churches (or at least arrange suitable contacts) and provide spiritual/pastoral support. Thus would a person's 'holistic needs' be met.

My research suggests churches generally respond inappropriately to the problems of ex-prisoners. Just like new converts who fail to realise religious experience is more than 'some magical disappearance of tribulation',[49] the idea of 'miraculous healing' can mislead and damage those expecting instant solutions to complex psycho-sexual problems. Lonely and burdened, unsurprisingly many ex-prisoners were religious 'nomads' looking for somewhere to belong. Others (like those released as Christians, but reimprisoned) were so acutely damaged even their faith was institutionalised.

This all highlights the crucial importance of effective support workers in the pre-release transition - reintegration process. Similar to the way in which reintegration to society was smoothest for prisoners who received outside support, those who successfully assimilated into church (or who expected to) also had appropriate support from Christian families and/or churches. This in turn highlights the fact that, at a time when perhaps they needed it most, released prisoners had relatively little contact with prison chaplains. I believe this reflects a deficient model of prison ministry.

While volunteer groups had significantly more contact, their ad hoc approach meant the degree and quality of support was generally inadequate, particularly for high-risk repeat offenders. Even friendships established in prison and Bible study/prayer meetings among ex-prisoners themselves, gradually yielded to new priorities/commitments in their lives.

A way forward

My research suggests that whereas Christian faith /programming has rehabilitative potential ' ... with at least some offenders under some circumstances',[50] it is not being adequately supported in Victoria's penal system. This is unacceptable given inmates' inviolable right to adequate religious servicing in prison, and arguably beyond.

Australian prisoners may not have a 1st Amendment guarantee to freedom of religious practice like US prisoners,[51] but their rights in this regard are enshrined in certain international instruments.[52]

To obstruct offenders intent on reforming themselves is wrong, shortsighted, and debunks the notion of rehabilitation (especially given the high-risk offenders in this study). Church and state have a responsibility - indeed the church is duty-bound - to provide prisoners receptive to Christianity with adequate religious servicing in a conducive environment (paedophiles requiring particular assistance given their relatively large number and unique problems). This implies the need for greater openness to religious issues on the part of correctional policy makers/practitioners; more and specialised Christian/corrections personnel; improved resources/facilities; new programme initiatives, and, of course, money. The long-term investment is worthwhile and, for our collective sake, not one society can afford to shirk.

However, my research further suggests that appropriate post-release follow-up of Christians is essential to effect rehabilitation. I know from experience the process of transition into society means to be neither truly prisoner nor free; a kind of amorphous entity that wars against itself because instincts and emotions conditioned in captivity react when suddenly released. While reintegration to society is difficult for any prisoner, it is harder for those who have served long sentences at a young age - more so if they wish to join a church and have little or no background experience.

Such people are expected to make a 'transcendent leap' from one extreme subculture (the prison) to another (the church) - many falling somewhere in between. Conditioned to one way of life, the transition to another is inherently difficult. Moreover, irrevocably changed by prison experience, the 'ex' is likely to feel and see things differently to other Christians. Prison-freedom, life-death, good-evil, love-hate, spirit-flesh; such extremes have shaped his/her world view, perception of self, and faith. Mainstream Christians may find this strange and overbearing. Having been part of a religious minority in prison an 'ex' risks similar marginalisation in church, where he may find nobody with whom to relate, accentuating loneliness. Like the wider community, a predominantly middle-class church is generally ignorant and/or apathetic about prison and the people who go there, which only serves to alienate people. Worse still, he/she may encounter a judgmental attitude; not uncommon according to my findings.[53]

Recommendations

From my study, I make the following recommendations to Victorian Government/Corrections and church/welfare policy-makers and practitioners in the field, social scientists and other interested persons:

- A 'holistic' approach to inmate care should be trialled in Victoria whereby the total needs of offenders are met. To this end, interested health care providers, religious personnel, and inmates agree to work together in a spirit of mutual cooperation and trust, with a psychospiritual component included in sex offender treatment programmes addressing, inter alia, guilt/forgiveness. This framework would best facilitate the 'process of working through,' essential for religious experience to be enduring.[54]
- However, a holistic approach must also encompass the difficult transition-reintegration process. In this regard, Prison Fellowship Victoria launched 'Lives in Transition' (LIT) in April 2002, a unique church-based mentoring programme providing pre/postrelease ministry to prisoners and their families. This important initiative will need unqualified support within the church/corrections, especially in light of the present findings that suggest an anti-Christian element among prison staff and exprisoners' difficulty assimilating church culture. High-risk offenders are a potential cause for concern, sex offenders in particular.[55]
- To have credibility, chaplaincy services must be augmented in size and quality. Ideally, all institutions should have specially trained, permanent (full/part-time) staff assigned, and the casual use of inexperienced local clergy/lay people to service regional prisons reviewed. Where unavailable or inadequate, Bible study/ prayer groups and church/counselling services should be implemented, and consideration given to having Pentecostalism officially represented within the ranks of chaplaincy. Building relationships with inmates is paramount. Established relationships should ideally be maintained when a prisoner is transferred, and, at least to the extent suggested below, consideration given to support with community reintegration.
- Whenever possible, chaplains/volunteers (and volunteer groups themselves) should be more proactive in order to optimise the e ffectiveness of limited resources. For example, mutual cooperation/

support could help to avoid potential ministry duplication and rivalry, address unmet religious service needs (church/Bible studies), present a united Christian front, and further the LIT initiative - chaplains linking suitable prisoners into the programme.

- Every facility should ideally have a designated chapel (not 'multipurpose' room). Mindful of prisoners' varying literacy levels and stages of faith, suitable Christian resources including books (especially autobiographies), audio-tapes (music/teaching), and Bible study aids, etc., should be made available - perhaps through a (church-sponsored) mobile library service.
- Prisoners are a largely untapped human resource. Consideration should be given to better utilising their diverse gifts, skills, and qualifications in the official preparation/delivery of religious services, and with peer counselling and/or discipline. This would potentially help to occupy prisoners, promote their confidence/personal development, and assist a depleted chaplaincy. Christian ex-prisoners also present a potentially useful resource in regard to prison/post-prison ministry.

This leaves us to consider what informants thought the church should be doing in order to provide more help for Christian ex-prisoners.

Their most common suggestion was to increase transition reintegration assistance, especially for long-term prisoners and/or those requiring a suitable Christian fellowship. Extensive psychological help and ongoing religious discipline and pastoral care were reportedly also needed. Sex offenders advocated a kind of therapeutic facility where they could go for help and/or receive unrestricted (telephone) access to a professional crisis counselling/support service, especially when they felt vulnerable to offending. Having a support group (like Alcoholics Anonymous) to ensure accountability and compliance with court directed treatment initiatives was deemed essential, likewise the need to correct public misconceptions about offending to instead focus on causal factors, not retribution, which only increases antidetection/ apprehension measures by offenders. Certainly, publications like The Australian Paedophile and Sex Offender Index (Coddington, 1997) and Crime Net (a web site disclosing criminal histories) perpetuated fear and discrimination.

However, there also had to be more in prison support and family assistance. To target properly the causes of offending, paedophiles advocated intensive/personalised care and long-term healing over group work and psychological 'pigeon-holing'. To this end they suggested an overhaul of clinical services, including: treatment throughout one's gaol sentence, not (towards) the end; elimination of judgmental/punitive-minded staff, and single cell accommodation (to decrease stress/contamination').

All of this would necessitate expansion of the church's ministry; a church, informants suggested, that needs to be better educated on penal issues; more caring, compassionate and involved with marginalised and broken people. Christians had to show (practical) love, mindful that some people found responding to love difficult; they had to choose tolerance and trust over prejudice, which meant including ex-prisoners in church life/ministry (sex offenders suitably monitored and restricted).

Finally, some felt the church needed to make a fundamental moral change. Preoccupied with wealth and power, confusing 'churchianity' for Christianity, lukewarm, worldly, soft - the church was said to have lost integrity and authority.

Notes

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53 An altogether different form of discrimination occurs when the Christian 'ex' is elevated to a kind of 'celebrity' status. A dramatic example of 'sinner come good,' he risks becoming a kind of anti-hero; ironically then, the very background society rejects endears him to Christians

54 Silverman, G., and Oglesby,W.B., op. cit.

55 Should Prison Fellowship Victoria take what appears to be the unprecedented step of accepting paedophiles (or other high-risk offenders) into its programme, a very high level of care will be required. On the other hand by being excluded their needs remain unmet, their futures uncertain.

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