Prison Break: Religion as a Way Out of Jail

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Dark lights, crumbling paint, iron bars, and lots (and lots) of shouting; this is how society often envisions the inside of a United States penitentiary. The extremely confining cells, lack of privacy, and horribly depressing décor provide a clear message to those who live within these walls. Nothing quite says, “Welcome to prison; you are here to stay,” like floor-to-ceiling iron bars, a stainless steel sink and toilet, a rickety old bunk bed, and, in some cases, the daily procedure of being handcuffed every time one leaves the cell. Even a prisoner’s own clothing is constrictive, usually consisting of a bright orange jumpsuit with no belt in order to prevent inmates from using them as weapons or as a means to hang themselves. When all these parts are put together, the cold, dark reality of prison life sets in: you are here for the long haul.

Make no mistake: the extremely confining conditions of prison life are not constructed by chance. The claustrophobic cells, strict daily routines, bleak interior, and lack of personal freedoms force prisoners to focus on what they did to get themselves in prison. Though beliefs guiding how the system is run may vary from prison to prison—some focusing solely on punishment, such as many maximum-security penitentiaries, while others are geared more towards repentance and reform—the general concept of prisons remains the same across all areas: prisoners are not supposed to enjoy their time there.

Religion is often the path people choose when they need help from all the burdens that life puts on them, and this is not exclusive to prisoners alone. Business executives, powerful politicians, nursing mothers, and even non-believers all turn to some form of faith when times are at their worst. For inmates, however, some form of religious practice is often seen as vital not only for an inmate to survive and overcome the physical and psychological burdens of prison life, but also to aid rehabilitation and avoid returning to prison after release. With the popular belief that prisons are a place of hopelessness and despair for the lost and the damned of society, religion provides a physical and mental escape from the constraints of life behind bars and a way of surviving America’s penal system.

The Pew Forum of Religion and Public Life contacted all 1,474 professional chaplains working in state prisons across the country and asked them to fill out a series of questionnaires regarding the religious lives of what is now more than 2.2 million people incarcerated nationwide (Lugo et al.). This study is valuable because it collected information regarding personal beliefs about religion in United States prisons from a prisoner’s “right-hand man” when it comes to faith behind bars. Published in March of 2012, the information released in this study is from questionnaires returned by 730 chaplains, which is a response rate of about 50% (Lugo et al.).

Of course, one cannot deny that many prisoners are guilty of the crimes in which they are convicted. Prison is a just form of retribution for their actions; many prisoners recognize the harm they have done and often take full responsibility for even the most heinous crimes. Occasionally it is true that some
prisoners simply wish to do harm to others; however, it is ignorant to think that all prisoners are rotten to the core. Here, religion, more than anything else, serves as quintessential evidence that prisoners often have the same mindset and future goals as other citizens. Unfortunately, prisoners have made a mistake much more grave than most others. As Robert Hawkins, associate pastor at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church, put it, “We’ve all done something we’re guilty of, [prisoners] just got caught” (Hartley).

Picture the scene: you are a newly incarcerated inmate who has just stepped into the bright orange jumpsuit that you will be sporting daily for the next five years. You never meant to hurt anyone by selling drugs on the corner; you desperately needed the money to feed your family. Growing up in poverty without a father and no more than a few years of a high school education meant that the odds of monetary success were highly stacked up against you. You knew what you were doing wasn’t right but was necessary at the time, and this decision landed you in a six-by-eight foot cage with a roommate whose crimes could range from robbing a convenience store to murdering his children. Of course not all crimes fit this simple description, but let us imagine for a moment that it conveys a reality for some inmates, who knew what they were doing but felt that it was necessary. With no way of physical escape, some form of religious observance can pull prisoners out from the depths of their own despair. This is why religion is so vital to rehabilitation in the lives of those behind bars. Once the idea of a faith-based lifestyle is presented, the prisoner can use it as a guide for tearing down the physical, psychological, and societal barriers that prison puts up. As former inmate Debra Brown, who was incarcerated for murdering her boss, said about her jailhouse religion, “You know what happens when you plant seeds. Stuff starts growing whether you like it or not…. The more I learned, the more I knew I was getting on the right track” (Hartley).

Since religion is often a common theme in prison life and can be used by prisoners to cope and get through the trials and tribulations of the penal system, inmates are frequently known to either join, rediscover, or convert religions once they become situated to life behind bars. According to the Pew Study, the majority of chaplains answered that there was either “a lot” of religious switching (26%) or “some” switching (51%) among inmates, a significantly high combined rate of 77% (Lugo et al.). As a follow up question, when chaplains were asked to estimate whether the number of inmates in a selected group of twelve religions was either increasing, decreasing, or staying the same, chaplains responded that the number of Muslims (51%) and Protestant Christians (47%) were growing; this is no surprise considering that these are the two most popular religions in the world (Lugo et al.). The Pew Study stressed, however, that these are only percentages of the number of inmates in that specific growing
religion, and may not represent the actual size of that religion in prison.

In fact, seven in ten chaplains considered access to religion-related programs in prison to be “absolutely critical” for successful rehabilitation and re-entry into society (Lugo et al.). With a smorgasbord of all different religions flowing through the penal system, inmates can use any one of these religions as a tool for successful rehabilitation and reform as well as a mental- and faith-based solace.

Beyond the psychological and rehabilitative benefits of being part of a religion in prison, membership and continued support for many religious organizations can often come with high levels of respect as well as an increased status, both inside and out of prison. The benefits certain religions receive can vary depending on the size of that religion and the availability and content of its practices, ranging from access to religious texts, special meeting times with certain faith leaders, such
as a priest or rabbi, to a special religious diet. According to the Pew study, when chaplains were asked whether requests by inmates for certain religious items or practices were either “usually approved,” “sometimes approved,” or “usually denied,” 82% of chaplains said religious texts were “usually approved,” 71% approved meetings with faith leaders, 53% for a special religious diet, and 51% for religious items or clothing (Lugo et al.). Some
inmates, however, have a much harder time practicing their faith behind bars. Though the U.S. Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act and First Amendment forbid prisons from placing restrictions on an inmate’s right to worship and must provide ways to do so as much as possible, these laws are readily open for interpretation. Many prisons, as well as government institutions, try to circumvent these laws in order to skimp out on costs for providing such benefits or to suppress the growth and spread of any such religion behind bars. Such was the case in 2007 when the Federal Bureau of Prisons formed the Standardized Chapel Library Project. This provided prison libraries a list of acceptable religious content, which was limited to only 150 book titles and 150 multimedia sources spanning over twenty different religions, and instructed prisons to remove all other religious material that was not on the list on the basis that it might advocate violence among inmates (Robinson). In addition, the Bureau of Prisons did not provide any funding to purchase materials that were not in the library but only those on the approved list (Robinson).

Naturally, these sanctions were met with nationwide disapproval, ranging from lawyers and religious organizations to chaplains and even inmates themselves. One inmate, a convert to Islam in prison named Douglas Kelly, stated, “It’s very important to have as much material as possible. What I know of Islam has been the result of the literature I’ve been able to get a hold of. I’ve seen the list of approved books, and 99 percent of them, we never had to begin with” (Robinson). Kelly’s comments, along with lawsuits by three current inmates and nationwide disapproval, forced the Bureau of Prisons to suspend the program and required prisons to replace all books that were removed (Robinson). This repeal of a policy by a government agency due to the refusal of inmates to adhere to such limiting standards is a prime example of how inmates can use religion as a tool for respect and power even at a national level.

Though the rate of recidivism is high in the United States, many prisoners wish to turn their lives around in an honest fashion and often use religion as a tool to do so. The reasons vary, whether it is to get adjusted to the harsh reality of prison life, to gain status among the inmate population who value a particular religion, or simply to practice one’s faith. When individuals put their beliefs in something outside of themselves, they often find they can do things they never thought possible, such as survive life behind bars.

Works Cited