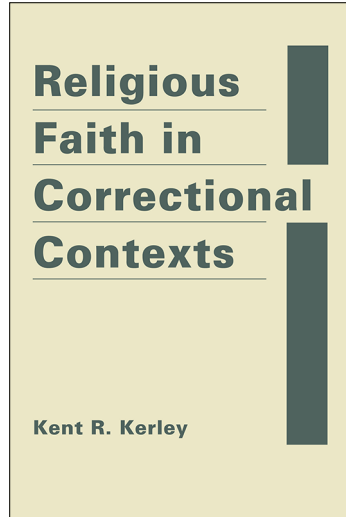


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# Religious Faith in Correctional Contexts

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# 1

## The Faith of Captives

I spent the last decade going into prisons and halfway houses to study people who have committed all sorts of horrific crimes, mostly while under the influence of hard-core drugs—but now now claim to be “changed,” “saved,” or “born again.” The underlying reason they cited for their dramatic change was a new or renewed religious faith. Let me share one striking example of this before-and-after scenario. I recall sitting in a damp, humid, and altogether depressing room where I interviewed an inmate assigned the name Klara. She recounted a difficult family life in which her mother spent time in several mental health institutions and, consequently, Klara “bounced back and forth” among several relatives. At one point she was even sent to foster care. She got into serious drug use in her early teens and continued using drugs even after having two children.

Klara was serving what may as well have been a life sentence for a long list of crimes. Chief among those was the attempted murder of a child: *her child*. Here she recounts what happened at the end of a week-long cocaine binge:

My case is very difficult and everything. You know, I was hearing voices and hallucinations. I ended up taking a plea bargain of 25 years, but anyway, my daughter could’ve died. I thought I was saving her, and I put her in the oven.

It was all I could do as a researcher to digest what she just said in such a matter-of-fact manner and not give a negative verbal or nonverbal response. The same woman who so casually described placing her baby in a hot oven while high on cocaine was now an active participant in the prison’s chapel services. She was even considered a spiritual mentor to other women in the prison. Here is how she described what had happened since she was incarcerated:

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And I got baptized and everything, and I come back to the dorm, and it was like I had got drunk in the Holy Spirit. And I was so drunk coming back to the dorm. And I remember looking out the window, and there's just the most beautiful rainbow out the window, you know, and it was just beautiful. And I couldn't make it a day in this prison without God. He's an awesome God. . . . And she lived [her baby], and she's this beautiful sweetheart today. And God is an awesome God. He let my daughter live. I hadn't seen my children in 7 years. And He just reunited me with my oldest daughter. I have two kids. He just reunited me with my oldest daughter and everything. She's forgiven me, and she understands. She was 7 at the time that it happened, and my baby was 14 months old.

How could this narrative of radical positive change belong to the same person who nearly killed her own baby? The only answer that Klara could provide was that a higher power had provided redemption.

If you watch television for a short while, soon you will see stories of homicide, rape, assault, child sexual abuse, drug addiction, and even terrorism. Not only are these crimes depicted in popular television shows and movies, but also real instances of them are depicted on local news networks, national news networks, 24-hour cable news networks, and online news sources. There is a rush among media commentators, political pundits, and even some academic researchers (assuming, of course, that media sources ask for our input) to explore the "criminal mind" of the accused. As details emerge in many criminal cases, we are told that the accused are evil and not likely to change.

But what if redemption, even for the worst offenders, is possible? What if people who commit vile acts can undergo radical change? If so, by what person or force can it happen? How does religious faith in prisons and halfway houses help offenders of all types to cope with the difficult institutional environment? What tools does faith provide for life after release from prisons and halfway houses?

### **Genesis of the Project**

To address these questions, let's go to the true beginning of this story. I flash back over ten years to a seemingly innocuous conversation with a neighbor. It was 2001, and during the span of six months I had accepted a job at Mississippi State University (MSU), completed my dissertation, got married, bought a house, and moved to Starkville, Mississippi. During my first semester as a new professor at MSU, a neighbor directly across the street came over to welcome my family to the neighborhood. He was a longtime professor at MSU in the School of Engineering and

was very active in a local faith congregation. About five minutes into our conversation, he asked me a question central to the southern cultural experience: “Do you attend church?”

My response was that we had in the past, but we had not yet visited any churches in the area. He described his church and indicated that they would love for us to visit at some point. He went on to describe a national prison ministry program (Operation Starting Line) that was scheduled to visit the largest prison in Mississippi later that fall, as well as a weekly ministry he had established with inmates in the local jail. Initially I think his intent was to gauge my interest in volunteering to help with one of the ministry opportunities, yet my mind was focused on the possibilities for empirical research. Questions came to mind such as: “Who organizes and conducts these programs?” “What faith content is included?” and “What are the short- and long-term impacts of these programs?” We ended the conversation with a promise for my neighbor to send me an e-mail with more details about the programs with which he was involved.

Although I knew a great deal about prisons from my undergraduate and graduate coursework, as well as from writing my dissertation, I knew very little about the social scientific literature on religion. In fact, I had never even taken a course on religion. This was a bit intimidating, and yet I was excited about the prospects of studying faith-based prison programs. My major professor from graduate school, Dr. Mike Benson, always emphasized the need for me to work hard, to be opportunistic, and to establish a niche research area in the field. His wisdom made me think that this might be a great opportunity. I then did what any well-trained assistant professor should do and read everything I could find on religion in prison. Normally I would limit myself to articles in peer-reviewed journals and in scholarly books, but I wanted to be exhaustive in my reading on the topic. Unexpectedly, this searching and reading took only a few days as I only found a sparse amount of material. From my reading I reached several preliminary conclusions.

First, I noted that most of the literature on religion in prison appeared in non-peer-reviewed outlets and did not use strong social science methodologies. Some of the problems with those studies included small samples, nonrepresentative samples, and limited statistical analysis. Moreover, the majority of studies focused on whether faith-based prison programs could reduce the likelihood of rearrests (i.e., recidivism) among inmates after their release. This was not surprising given the emphasis on program evaluation in the field of criminal justice, but to me it seemed conceptually backward. How can we understand the effects of prison programs, especially ones that are

faith-based, on inmates' attitudes and behaviors after prison if we do not first understand the impact on attitudes and behaviors while in prison?

Second, I noted the large number of studies conducted by the prison ministry providers themselves or commissioned by them. Not surprisingly, evaluations of various national, regional, and local prison programs were overwhelmingly positive and the programs promised even more sanguine results if only they could be expanded and receive greater funding. It was not uncommon to read of a program touting a recidivism rate of less than 40 percent (the national average is about 67 percent), and some claimed as little as 20 percent. I realized quickly that independent research with strong science methods was needed in the area.

Third, I noted that faith-based prison programs appeared to be a hot topic in national politics and according to most media sources. After assuming office in early 2001, President George Walker Bush, via Executive Order 13199, created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFCBI). During the campaign, candidate Bush had been very public about his religious faith and in his support for faith-based programs of all stripes. It was no surprise, then, that he created an office that, among other things, would help local and state faith-based organizations that provide social services to compete for federal grants. This possibility existed because of the little-known "charitable choice" provision of the 1996 federal welfare bill. In addition to creation of the OFCBI, state departments of correction were engaged in debates over how best to rehabilitate inmates with as little funding as possible. Many states determined that faith-based prison programs had several advantages over many traditional correctional programs and thus began to use them more frequently.

Fourth, I noted a uniquely southern component to the literature on faith-based programs. Although the earliest use of faith-based prison programs was by the Quakers in the northeastern United States, in contemporary times prisons in the southern region appeared to use them more often and have more local faith congregations involved than any other part of the country. Moreover, rates of church attendance tend to be higher in the southern region than in other regions, and many scholars have written about the southern culture of religiosity (see, for example, Reed 1993). For all of those reasons, I am convinced that the South is the ideal research site for a study on faith-based prison programs.

I also want to comment in more detail on the political nature of the topic for this book. I learned quickly that there are often only two viewpoints on the utility and usefulness of religion as a method of correctional treatment or prison coping. On the one side, there are those

who disagree with the concept of offering faith-based programs because of concerns about prisoner coercion. Groups such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State frequently have pursued legal action against states and programs that they feel create a coercive prison environment. At times they have adopted the position that faith-based programs should not be offered at all in prisons, with the rationale that requiring voluntary participation is too great a standard to achieve.

Even my colleagues in academia—those claiming to be scholars and not political activists—have shown significant bias at times. I once had a reviewer from *Justice Quarterly* (one of the top journals in criminology/criminal justice) who was “not comfortable with direct quotations from the Bible.” You might be tempted to agree with the reviewer until you hear the full context. This was a paper on how inmates use faith to cope with incarceration and to create new prosocial identities while in prison. It involved an analysis of interviews with inmates who were actively involved in religious programs at a large prison in Mississippi. The inmates routinely paraphrased and referenced various Scriptures as they told their stories. To make these references clearer to readers, we looked up the handful of Scriptures most commonly referenced by the inmates and included those in the paper. That the reviewer had problems with scriptural references made by those being interviewed displayed a personal bias, and not a concern for strong social science standards.

On the other side are directors of national prison ministry programs and key leaders of evangelical Protestant congregations, especially in the southern region. For example, Charles Colson, former director of Prison Fellowship Ministries, was very visible in writing books and articles and conducting media interviews in support of faith-based programs. Unfortunately, this advocacy for faith-based prison programs has often led to the diminution and critique of all prison programs that are not faith-based, including many successful educational and vocational programs.

In some cases those who support the expansion of faith-based programs in prisons often neglect to think through the logistics of their programs, especially in terms of assuring that participation is voluntary and in specifying the role that prison chaplains and local congregants will play. I once had a chaplain tell me about a program where members of a local congregation came into a large unit that held about 150 inmates and held a weekly prayer and worship service. The program organizers claimed that the inmates had the choice of coming over to participate or not, but given the size of the unit and the loudness of the music and speakers, it was virtually impossible to document voluntary

participation. One organizer allegedly told the chaplain that “we are okay with forcing some people to hear a little of our message since it is a good one.” My view is that extreme positions on both sides of the issue have served to limit the creation of scientific knowledge.

Over the past decade I have collaborated with nearly two dozen faculty colleagues and students to study faith in correctional contexts. We have found positive, negative, and mixed results for the effects of faith-based programs in prisons, and my research has been criticized at times by both sides. Some have suggested that my results showing positive impacts of religion on prison coping are not as strong as I have portrayed them. Others have suggested that my results are too tempered, and that I should be more emphatic when my results are positive for religion. To be honest, I feel some degree of satisfaction from this and have concluded that it must be an indication that I have found a reasonable balance between two extreme positions. For me the main goal is to conduct studies that have strong social scientific standards. Whether analyzing survey data or interview transcripts, I do not pray or cross my fingers in hope of a particular result. My collaborators and I simply analyze the data and report the results. That may be difficult for ideologues and activists on both sides to understand, but it is the cornerstone of good science. In reading this book my hope is not that you will take a dogmatic position on the value of religion in correctional contexts, but simply that you will learn a great deal about the topic from an independent researcher.

### **Summary and Plan for the Book**

An impressive research literature has identified a significant relationship between religion and a wide range of attitudes, behaviors, and life events. Studies of the relationship between religion and crime or deviance in the general public and in prison have not always produced significant or uniform effects. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on religion and the commission of criminal and deviant acts, as well as the literature on the effects of religion on prison misconduct and recidivism. Chapter 3 explores the narratives of 30 chaplains and local religious congregants who organize and provide faith-based prison programs in Mississippi.

Chapter 4 describes the conversion experience from the research literature and then focuses on an analysis of the conversion narratives of 173 prisoners from Alabama and Mississippi. Chapter 5 details the lived experience of faith from the perspective of 63 incarcerated men at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, Mississippi. Chapter 6



details the lived experience of faith from the perspective of 40 incarcerated women at the Janet Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, Alabama.

Chapter 7 explores the narratives of 70 residents of a faith-based halfway house for women in Birmingham, Alabama. Chapter 8 explores the narratives of what 173 religious converts expect after release from prisons and halfway houses and how they claim faith will help them adjust to society and be successful. In the final chapter, Chapter 9, I bring together all of the scholarly concepts and findings from this work. I also focus on the future of faith-based programs, especially faith-based prison programs, from the vantage point of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

The purpose of this book is to understand the lived experience of religious faith in correctional contexts. In particular, I explore how individuals use faith to adapt and survive in difficult institutional settings such as prisons and halfway houses. I explore these topics via an analysis of 203 in-depth interviews. This total number was comprised of 103 inmates, 30 prison ministry workers, and 70 residents of a faith-based halfway house (see the Appendix for complete information on all data sources).