THE PENITENT:
THE MYTHS AND REALITIES OF
RELIGIOUS REHABILITATION
AMONG CALIFORNIA PRISONERS

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Abstract

While religion and corrections are historically intertwined and share a common concern with moral codes of behavior, their interaction in the context of prison and parole is not very well understood. Through interviews with men and women who converted to a new faith or re-committed to their previous faith while they were in prison, this study seeks to understand the experiential path of the religious ex-offender. Considering how and why criminally offending men and women become involved in religious groups, this study investigates questions of religion and social integration, influences in conversion and commitment, and gender in religiosity. The data to support this inquiry come from three sources: 1) Observations of religious meetings and ceremonies in prison, 2) Interviews with prison chaplains, clergy and volunteers who minister to prison and re-entering populations, and 3) Interviews with consenting ex-felons who embraced faith themselves while they were in prison. The study focuses on the three chief religious groups in the American penal institution: Non-denominational Christians, Roman Catholics, and Muslims. This study reveals insights into the reason and meaning of turning to religion in prison and reentering society with it. It points out secular lessons from the study of faith among prisoners, such as the value of moral communities, reintegrative shaming, and the important meaning that opportunities for altruism provide. It points to the often tenuous and breakable nature of spiritual commitment, and questions our understanding of transformation and how it implicitly informs our penal system. The study concludes that more than faith and moral resolve are required for successful re-entry into society, but that offenders' sense of God in their lives can be pivotal, especially as it gives them belief in their own value.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................................. III
ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................................... IV
LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................................. VII
INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 1
CHAPTER I: CONTEXTUALIZING AND INTRODUCING THE STUDY ......................................................... 14
REVIEW OF LITERATURE .................................................................................................................... 14
  History of Religion and Prison ........................................................................................................ 14
  General Theories of Religion ........................................................................................................... 25
  Theories and Research on Religious Conversion ............................................................................ 32
  Deviance, Religion and Prison ........................................................................................................... 39
METHODS .......................................................................................................................................... 46
  Qualitative Approach ....................................................................................................................... 46
  Bill Roberts ...................................................................................................................................... 51
  Research Methods ............................................................................................................................ 56
CHAPTER II: FINDING RELIGION IN PRISON .................................................................................... 62
DISTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS ......................................................................................... 62
  Religious Affiliation in the General Population and in Prison ......................................................... 63
  Religious Participation in the General Population and in Prison ..................................................... 65
CONTACT .......................................................................................................................................... 72
  Legal Protections for Religion in Prison ............................................................................................ 72
  Desperation ....................................................................................................................................... 76
  The Encounter .................................................................................................................................. 84
PRISON CULTURE AND THE PURSUIT OF FAITH .......................................................................... 92
  Freedom ........................................................................................................................................... 93
  Meaning .......................................................................................................................................... 95
  Increased Status and Improved Associations .................................................................................. 96
CHAPTER III: HOW PRISON CULTURE HINDERS FAITH INVOLVEMENT ........................................ 101
ISLAMIC COSTS .................................................................................................................................. 103
  Unequal Treatment ......................................................................................................................... 103
  Post 9-11 Climate .............................................................................................................................. 106
  Expensive Religion ........................................................................................................................... 111
CHRISTIAN COSTS ............................................................................................................................. 113
  Where Christians are Wimps .......................................................................................................... 114
  Race Loyalty .................................................................................................................................... 115
  A Walk That Is Real ........................................................................................................................ 121
COMPENSATING FOR THE COSTS .................................................................................................... 125
RATIONAL CHOICE ANALYSIS ......................................................................................................... 130
CHAPTER IV: VARIETY AND RELIGION IN PRISON .......................................................................... 135
THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCTRINE ................................................................................................... 136
  Bible Stories ...................................................................................................................................... 137
  The Roots of Islam in Prison .............................................................................................................. 142
  Catholic Religion versus a “Relationship Approach” ...................................................................... 149
GENDER ............................................................................................................................................... 156
  Confounding the Findings ................................................................................................................ 157
  Not Gender-Neutral ......................................................................................................................... 167
CHAPTER V: THE FUNCTIONS OF FAITH IN PRISON ....................................................................... 179
MORAL COMMUNITY ......................................................................................................................... 181
  “Family” Ties ..................................................................................................................................... 182
  Social Capital .................................................................................................................................... 188
  Human Kindness and the Company of God’s Love ....................................................................... 190
REINTEGRATION ................................................................................................................................. 193
  Braithwaite’s Reintegrative Shaming ............................................................................................... 193
  Forgiveness and Rebirth .................................................................................................................. 194
TRANSFORMATION ............................................................................................................................. 199
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion Reintegrates</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison Becomes A Good Thing</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measuring Transformation</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value System Transformed</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving Back and Altruism</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER VI: FAITH FLUCTUATES</strong></td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Background or “Capital”</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Background</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians Conserve Religious Capital</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims Conserve Religious Capital</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“PHONIES” AND JAILHOUSE RELIGION</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Insincere” Motives</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jailhouse Religion</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHY BACKSLIDING ACCOMPANIES RELEASE</strong></td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Gets in the Way</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temptation Abounds</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER VII: LESSONS AND ASSUMPTIONS</strong></td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside-Out</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressing Hard</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical Realities</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEW KNOWLEDGE FROM THIS STUDY</strong></td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Lessons from the Study of Faith</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including God</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX 1: CONTACT CHART</strong></td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT PROFILES</strong></td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REFERENCES</strong></td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables
Table 1: Religious Workers Interviewed .......................................................... 59
Table 2: Ex-Felons Interviewed ..................................................................... 60
Table 3: Religious Participation Comparisons .............................................. 67
Table 4: Expected Chapel Attendance Compared with Actual .................... 70
Table 5: Costs and Benefits Summarized ...................................................... 126
Table 6: Considering Gender in the Cost/Benefit Analysis .......................... 175
Table 7: Incarceration and Spiritual Progression .......................................... 259
Table 8: Incarceration, Spiritual Progression and Backsliding .................... 259
Introduction

The alchemists have a saying, 'Tertium non data': the third is not given. That is, the transformation from one element to another, from waste matter into best gold, is a process that cannot be documented. It is fully mysterious. No one really knows what effects the change. And so it is with the mind that comes from its prison to a vast plain without any movement at all. We can only guess at what happened.

– Jeanette Winterson (Winterson 1989)

The American penal system today is a place of punishment, and is unrecognizable as a locus designed to usher inmates through personal and spiritual transformation. But America’s history of incarceration has deep roots in Christian conceptions of transformation. The social sciences, in spite of this history, have little wisdom about the “mysterious” change that takes place in the mind of a prisoner who emerges from prison “transformed.” Starting with the idea that a clearer understanding of spiritual transformation in prison would be worthwhile, both to probe the assumptions underlying our “correctional” system, and to elucidate the rare occurrence of in-prison transformation, this study defies any admonition that such a process “cannot be documented,” and sets out to chronicle and analyze a spiritual journey that begins when a prison gate locks. Through the stories and reflections of 18 former felons who consider themselves to have experienced a transformation in prison, and 13 spiritual workers who minister to prisoners, this dissertation reveals that the question of a prisoner’s spiritual transformation is indeed complex, but that it can be documented, or at least in some measure understood, with patient dialogue.

The questions this dissertation sets out to answer are “How and why do prison inmates seek and find faith?” and “Why does it matter?” To answer the first question,
we consider the statements of participants who reflect on what they have experienced and observed in prison. From their first contact with their chosen faith group, to the times when they fell of the path, former inmates offer detailed accounts of the feelings and thoughts that prompt and result in what ends up being their current faith commitment. The answers to how and why they seek and find can be summarized as follows:

- Prisoners seek faith involvement to allay feelings of desperation and sadness.
- Prisoners find religion through contacts they make in prison with other inmates, with volunteers and with prison clergy.
- Prisoners commit to faith because it provides them with a sense of freedom despite their confinement, meaning in the face of bleakness, and occasionally increased social status.
- Prisoners’ commitment either falls off or deepens as they face the sometimes very difficult challenges of in-prison faith practice.
- Prisoners connect with religious themes and concepts that resonate or are useful to them in prison.
- All of these factors vary according to the gender of the prisoner.

The question “Why it matters?” takes the study deeper into the sociology of religion and corrections. The answer relies greatly on this notion of transformation, alluded to a moment ago. If the prisoner is expected to enter prison as a criminal offender and come out as someone who is not a criminal offender, we can say that it is assumed some sort of transformation is expected to take place. The truth is, of course, that little exists in the structure of American prisons that would make this likely to happen. Rather, our prisons, which once made inadequate attempts to rehabilitate inmates, now focus on incapacitation and punishment, having altogether abandoned any efforts at transformation, even as an ideal. The abandonment of the
transformative ideal and the rehabilitative ideal alike notwithstanding, there is still an expectation that offenders leaving prison should not recidivate. Why such an expectation persists, even when rehabilitative programs are completely dismantled in favor of warehousing and punishing offenders, seems paradoxical. A historical look at the penal system reveals that there is a basic assumption around prison, and that its origins are religious and hinge upon the notion of spiritual and personal transformation.

In this dissertation, I discuss the evidence that such a transformation does not happen for the vast majority of prisoners, but that the assumption endures nevertheless. The persistence of the transformation assumption is part of what prompts us to ask, Why does it matter how and why prisoners find faith? Using the qualitative data from study participants, in the context of history, theory and past research, this dissertation offers the following answers:

- It matters precisely because this assumption about transformation exists, because the origins of the assumption are religious, because the assumption seems to be accurate only occasionally, and because the concept of human transformation is inherently elusive and therefore fascinating.

- It matters because about 93% of the people currently in prison will eventually leave (Petersilia 2003), and it would be of great practical value to have a better idea of what changes take place among that minority who actually do manage not to go back to prison.

- It matters because American society is decidedly schizophrenic on the subject of religion (especially as it concerns state-run institutions), because sociology tends to have a secular bias, and because criminology tends to draw prescriptive conclusions. These things have combined to produce intellectually superficial analyses on the subject of religion and prison – analyses that haven’t much promise as guides given the emotionally provocative nature of both religion and crime control.
The dissertation begins with a review of the relevant literature on the subject of religion, prison and conversion. Here we look at the role that faith played to help shape our current penal system, and how Christian concepts helped to inform the rarely-examined assumptions upon which this system is built, namely, that a prison sentence will transform criminals into law-abiding citizens, and that by addressing individual morality we can “correct” criminal behavior. We also look at how sociology has explained religious searching and conversion, from William James’s “divided self,” to Stark and Lofland’s seven-point list of the conditions for conversion, all the way to the current trend toward rational choice perspectives. And we consider past and current studies on crime and religion, which overwhelmingly approach the topic with a view to religion’s deterrent effects on crime, but do not find the relationship between religion and law-abidance to be as strong, enduring, or direct as expected.

Reviewing religion’s historic role and its anticipated dissuasive effect on criminal offending reminds the reader that the idea that faith practice could transform a criminal offender to a law-abiding member of society is not new. In fact, it is integral to the whole approach of incarcerating and then releasing criminal offenders as we do. But the mechanisms involved in this transformation are not well-understood, or even thoroughly investigated by most of the current studies. This oversight means that assumptions about prison’s possible transformative power are largely
unexamined and potentially faulty. The starting point for this dissertation is to look at what the previous studies have overlooked.

This dissertation argues that the persistent use of temporary incarceration and release demonstrates our implicit reliance on the notion of transformation. Michel Foucault writes, "the self-evidence of the prison is [in part] based on its role, supposed or demanded, as an apparatus for transforming individuals" (Foucault 1979: 233). Furthermore, as our data will show, there is certainly a strong religious presence in prison. After the literature review and methods section we begin to look at that presence and see ways that the prison setting is peculiarly conducive to the pursuit of faith. Comparisons between prison and general populations on faith affiliation and participation show that, in some ways, prison is a very religious place. For explanations, we draw on the sociology of religion literature reviewed in the first chapter, which puts forth the idea that faith is often sought to allay misery. We also look to the testimony of participants who confirm that the bleakness of prison life, and a profound sense of regret, desperation and sadness prompt prisoners to turn to faith behind bars.

So, with a historical tradition of religious indoctrination, and with an environment that may prompt spiritual searching, the prison could very well be expected to produce a good deal of religious conversion and spiritual transformation. The studies reviewed in the first chapter, however, do not provide consistent evidence that that is the case. Rather, using recidivism and prison infractions as dependent variables, they
find a weak or spotty relationship between faith group participation and law abidance. While these studies do not claim to be operationalizing transformation with these outcome measures, the findings do raise some questions about the breadth and depth of prison faith-group participation and the endurance of its effects.

To answer these questions, we turn to the participant data from this study and find that, while prison culture may create fertile ground for spiritual reflection, it is not necessarily favorable for religious participation. According to study participants, there are a number of ways that faith participation is obstructed in prison. Christian men report experiencing pressures that sometimes involve threats of physical violence, that are based on racial divisions in prison, and that emphasize the exaggerated culture of masculinity in prison. Muslim participants offer stories of intolerance from prison staff and administration. It may be that these costs offset the benefits of faith-group participation and, in effect, deter widespread or profound involvement.

Here we begin to note that the experiences of Muslims and Christians in prison are rather different, and that the experiences of men and women in prison, vis-à-vis religion, may be quite different as well, given the nature of the challenges Christian men report. As we look closer at the two faith affiliations, Christianity and Islam, we see that there are specific aspects of each faith that may appeal to prisoners. We discuss the origins of American Islam in prison, and posit that the reputation of the Nation of Islam still haunts prison perspectives on orthodox Islam. We see that while
identification with the nationalist movement is not always welcome by Muslim inmates, it is nevertheless partially responsible for the popularity of this faith in US prisons. Islam is growing rapidly in US prisons, but still only a very small portion of inmates practice it – by far the most popular faith in US prisons is what is generally referred to as “Non-denominational Christian” faith. Considering this, we look at the statements of our sample’s converted Christians, whose conversion narratives are often infused with Biblical stories, and who frequently discuss having a personal relationship with God. The directness of relationship and Biblical access are things that make this form of faith a good fit with prisoners’ experiences, and may help explain why Protestant prison services are more popular than Roman Catholic.

Looking next at gender differences, we must acknowledge that a good deal of what we know about faith and crime or faith and prison is very gender specific. But there are substantial differences in prison culture, in violence levels, and in general patterns of faith practice between men and women. These differences restrict the generalizability of most religion and prison studies to men alone. Unlike most of the others, this study does consider women, and can therefore point out where current knowledge has gaping holes. Unfortunately, the number of female ex-felons who

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1 Throughout this dissertation, there will be frequent references to God. I will use the capitalized form of the word, for consistency, and to signify a respect for the subject matter. Participants in this study all refer to “God” as though God were an object as real as the color green. The possibility 1) that the color green appears differently to every person who perceives it, or 1) that some people do not perceive it at all does not interfere with most people’s use of the word. So it is with these participants in how they refer to God. So for the purposes of this analysis, I adopt the same language they do, registering through my language that God is something that exists. Whether or not this is the case is, of course, irrelevant to this study. But, in this dissertation, to insert a caveat clarifying each reference to God as a “perception of God,” would be as tiresome as such a caveat about the color green would be in a discussion of photosynthesis.
participated in the study is low, so rather than stop up the holes, this study can only recommend new sets of questions whose answers might begin to fill in the cavities left by the studies so far. For instance, in addition to looking at things like how the aggression of male prisons has an impact on faith participation, considering gender points us to looking more closely at the role of personal relationships in faith conversion and involvement, a premise brought up in much of the theoretical literature around faith conversion. Women prisoners have closer relationships, both with other inmates and with people on the outside, than do male prisoners, and the importance of this difference becomes clearer as we look at the ways that former inmates discuss their relationships and the role these relationships had on their pursuit of faith and their rejection of crime.

Understanding that prison is an environment that is simultaneously conducive to and dissuasive from faith group participation (which may or may not lead to spiritual transformation) may help us to better understand why past studies find such a small minority of prisoners experiencing a demonstrable life change from their prison faith involvement. We now should also have some notion that there are differences between prison experiences of Islam and Christian faiths, and between the experiences of men and women who find faith in prison. But we still know little of the mechanisms of transformation, or the functions of faith for the prisoner. As mentioned earlier, one premise of this dissertation is that the phenomenon of finding faith in prison is worth studying because of its potential practical value. A small number of prisoners become involved in faith groups and stop offending, attributing
that change in their lives to their new faith. But what precisely happens to prisoners who are involved in faith groups in prison, and how can sociology help elucidate it? Using data from participants who discuss what faith provides, given the specific context of lives fraught with stigma, characterized by fractured relationships, and thrown into crisis through incarceration and release, the dissertation then explores some familiar sociological themes.

We find that much of the data from this study support the *moral communities hypothesis*, which posits that the moral influence of a supportive faith community yields more power over moral resolve than even the faith tenets themselves (Stark, Doyle et al. 1980; Welch and Tittle 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1996). The many statements by participants about their relationships within their faith groups guide this discussion. We also look at John Braithwaite’s theory of *reintegrative shaming*, which bears significantly in this treatise, especially as we look at participants’ statements about the value of *forgiveness* and *rebirth* in their prison faith. According to Braithwaite, the process of prosecution and conviction certifies a person as deviant, and effective reintegration should include a decertification of that individual, away from the label of deviant (Braithwaite 1989). But the typical prison experience does not present much opportunity for a prisoner to be de-certified as a deviant in preparation for re-entry. So the ritualized forgiveness of a supportive faith community can be particularly significant for these inmates, which is one of the key findings of this study.
Our discussion then turns to the elusive concept of transformation. Former inmates themselves have a good deal to say about the reintegrative effects of religious participation, to the point where they actually can reframe prison as an overall positive experience, in that it facilitated their transformation. Other than participants’ statements of having experienced transformation, however, we have few reliable ways of measuring transformation. We can observe, at least, that former felons discuss changes that they have seen in their own value systems. Most notably, participants regularly talked about having a new way of life that was based in the value of service, to God and to their fellow human being. This new, more altruistic orientation is also found among Patricia O’Brien’s study participants, for whom altruistic service is part of what denotes “making it” (O’Brien 2001). So many of the former felons in the study demonstrated a new devotion to “giving back,” that it stands out as another key finding, which may even be part of a way to operationalize transformation. Regardless, the role of altruism and service among former felons appears very important and warrants more research.

Another key finding on the question of transformation has to do with the fragility of faith. On the topic of transformation, it is almost impossible to avoid the metaphor of a caterpillar that, after its confinement in a chrysalis, emerges a butterfly. In fact, this symbolic image comes up frequently when I mention my dissertation topic to colleagues and friends. But the stories of study participants make it clear that this metaphor misses something essential. Namely, those who find faith are very likely to lose it again, and return, if you will, to the state of a caterpillar. Among the men and
women of this study, about half had found faith in prison at least once before, then
returned to society and re-offended, only to find faith again during their next prison
sentence. With a couple of exceptions, the former felons who were interviewed here
were recommended by their pastors, priests and imams as shining examples of former
prisoners who had turned away from crime permanently, meaning, presumably, that
this time their devotion to faith should stick. Of course, we cannot know this.

What we can take from these stories, though, is that faith is rarely constant. Rather, it
ebbs and flows, breaks and is re-built, according to the changes and challenges of life.
Among the changes for these individuals was, of course, the disruptive experience of
incarceration. Equally disruptive, however, can be the experience of release. Finding
themselves locked up, many sought immediate physical relief from confinement in
the chapel, which makes their motives appear disingenuous to some observers. But
our data show that the motives of prisoners are more complex than that. Failure to
live up to the principles of faith is common enough among religious adherents in all
life circumstances, but for criminal offenders, this failure is often seen, by prison
officials, by fellow inmates, and by social scientists, as evidence of insincerity. Most
inmates who attend prison chapel services will leave prison to offend again, and many
will be seen as “phonies” for having done so. But even those who do not re-offend
tell stories about the tremendous challenge that release from prison presents to their
faith commitment, calling into question the imputation of labels such as “phony” and
“insincere.”
Which brings us to the major flaw in the aforementioned assumption of prison transformation. Put simply, a re-entering prisoner's success relies upon more than a faith-based, moral transformation – practical supports, such as employment, housing and other stabilizing factors, are, statistically closer determinants of parole survival (Petersilia 2003). To some extent, the participants in this study were assisted in these practical ways by their faith communities, although most discuss the inadequacy of both faith-based and secular supports on this front. It is clear from their testimonies that their faith helped them through the challenge of re-entry, but that moral resolve did not act alone, because moral resolve is simply not enough. Ours is a criminal justice system that does not seem to acknowledge the almost obtuse observation that re-entering offenders will need practical supports in order to avoid reoffending. Instead, our approach seems to unconsciously embrace an abstract idea that some sort of moral transformation will occur for the prisoner while she is in prison, and that this will suffice to solve the problem of crime. This may sound like an overly simplistic assessment of our penal system, but the dearth of authentic re-entry programs and supports for parolees and returning felons belies any claim that the American penal system is designed to escort prisoners out of criminal lifestyles and into productive, law-abiding ones. Instead, there is this concept of transformation, about which we know so little. The intended contribution of this study is that now we may know a little more.

Tallying the lessons from this inquiry, we will lean, as is the tradition of social science, toward the secular. The first lesson is that prison culture is both conducive
to and dissuasive of deep faith participation, and that the specific tenets of a faith may resonate with individuals in the specific environment of the prison. We also learn that this, along with the role of interpersonal relationship in faith conversion and adherence, may vary quite a bit according to gender. Next, we learn that prisoners do rely upon and therefore benefit from the *moral community* that a prison faith group creates. We also learn that faith participation furnishes inmates with rare opportunities for *reintegrative shaming*, which may be essential to successful re-entry. We learn that most of these former inmates shape their new lives around acts of *service* and *altruism*, upon which they perceive their own virtue to be dependent. Finally, we learn that faith is fragile and fleeting, and that practical realities often interfere with valiant attempts to turn lives of crime into lives of faith commitment.

But we begin this dissertation with the criticism that secular bias in social science is one of the reasons our body of knowledge on religion and prison has been so flimsy. And so before concluding, we must spend some time acknowledging what the participants themselves have been saying throughout these pages, that God touched their lives. This is significant not only because without it study participants would not recognize their own stories of struggle and triumph, but also because it brings an important insight. These men and women were able to see themselves as special, worthy and redeemable because of how they saw God come into their lives. We cannot know that a secular process that included a *moral community*, *reintegrative shaming*, opportunities for *service*, and *practical supports* would not be as successful. In fact, a compelling argument could be made that these are *the* critical ingredients to
successful re-entry. But we do know that, for these individuals, these critical ingredients were provided by God, and that His presence in their lives allowed them to see themselves as capable of personal transformation and successful re-entry.

Chapter I: Contextualizing and Introducing the Study

Review of Literature

A relatively small body of literature pertains directly to the relationship between religious commitment and deviance, prison and religion, or religion and recidivism. What there is helps direct this research. We begin by reviewing the historical relationship between religion and penal conceptions, about which a fair amount is written. Then we look at the phenomenon of religious conversion and the explanatory value offered by common theories of social science. After that, we can turn to the relatively small body of deviance literature that considers religion, and begin to consider how the current study fits into the history, theory and prior research around religion and prison.

History of Religion and Prison

Generally speaking, a society’s definitions of morality and criminality are tied closely to its religious traditions and tenets. Durkheim writes, “We cannot instance a single
society where the vendetta was the primitive form of punishment. On the contrary, it is certain that penal law was essentially religious in origin" (Durkheim 1984:49).

After citing examples from India, Judea, Egypt, Rome and ancient Germany, he continues, "The religious life is made up entirely of abnegation and altruism. Thus if criminal law was originally religious law, we may be sure that the interests it served were social. It is offences against themselves that the gods avenge by punishment, and not those of individuals. But the offences against the gods are offences against society" (Durkheim 1984:49-50). Moving into the modern era, the connection between criminal law and religion is perhaps less explicit, but historically our criminal approach cannot be considered without acknowledging the powerful influence of religious organizations.

David Garland writes, "When historians talk of the cultural forces which have influenced penal policy, the forces they have in mind are most often religion and humanitarianism" (Garland 1990:203). And the religious influence in the Western penal system has been predominantly Christian. During the first hundred years after Constantine's conversion to Christianity, 312-412 A.D., Rome's judicial policies became more punitive, widespread and brutal with increased use of torture and the death penalty (MacMullen 1967 cf. Rambo 1993: 151-152). Then, in the Medieval Era, the Roman Catholic Church formed its own institutions of imprisonment for criminal offenders. Influenced by monasticism, these institutions confined inmates to cells and originated the concept of penitential discipline (Garland 1990). These original Catholic institutions attempted to produce spiritual redemption of prisoners
by using prayer and by inflicting corporal punishment\(^2\) (Foucault 1979; Garland 1990). This technique would later become the model for the early, modern era European and American penitentiaries.

The European approach to criminal treatment that was emerging alongside Capitalism in the 17\(^{th}\) Century differed from the popular approaches of transportation and galley slavery. Instead, the new concept was separation, which borrowed from the medieval Catholic model. To separate or incarcerate an individual was, at the time, seen as a more practical and humane way of dealing with the problem of criminal offenders. Ideas of reform were taking hold as the concept of the penitentiary arrived in England in 1779, where crusading reformers such as John Howard brought a “discipline, informed by Christian charity and humanitarian concerns” (Hawkins and Alpert 1989:34). According to Hawkins and Alpert, in the penitentiary, “Moral treatment was to be rendered by making the prisoners agents of their own reform. Exposure to religious lectures, forced Bible readings, and reflection was to produce contrition and rebirth” (Hawkins and Alpert 1989:33). This vision was largely the work of Protestant Christians, such as Quakers Elizabeth Fry and William Allen, who not only applied the medicine of their Christian message to offenders, but also imposed order and discipline as priorities toward the goal of individual reform (Ignatieff 1978:143-

\(^2\) Michel Foucault points out that medieval law allowed physical torture to be at once investigation and punishment; he also points to low cost of human labor, Christian contempt for the body, and high mortality rate as external cultural and demographic factors which contributed to the acceptance of public torture (but the main reason for its use was political – the symbolic and real power of the sovereign). Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The History of the Prison*. New York, Vintage Book.
The idea behind the Protestant approach to criminal treatment was that people should be motivated to avoid crime because of a "love of Christ" rather than just a fear of punishment (Forsythe 1987:45). Incarcerated, criminals would become *penitent*, read the Bible, learn discipline, and embrace a lawful life.

The moral transformation would come from a combination of work and religious practice. The ideal progression of the prisoner from outlaw to stalwart is outlined below in a document from 1831, reprinted in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.

"Work, alternating with meals accompanies the convict to evening prayer; then a new sleep gives him an agreeable rest that is not disturbed by the phantoms of an unregulated imagination. Thus the six weekdays pass by. They are followed by a day devoted exclusively to prayer, instruction and salutary meditations. Thus the weeks, the months, the years follow one another; thus the prisoner who, on entering the establishment, was an inconstant man, or one who was single-minded only in his irregularity, seeking to destroy his existence by the variety of his vices, gradually becomes by dint of a habit that is at first purely external, but is soon transformed into a second nature, so familiar with work and the pleasures that derive from it, that, provided wise instruction has opened up his soul to repentance, he may be exposed with more confidence to temptations, when he finally recovers his liberty." (Julius, N. H. *Leçons sur les prisons* 1831 cf. Foucault 1979 239-240)

Meanwhile, similar developments were taking place in America. In 1787 the Philadelphia Society of Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons formed, and it suggested that the "obligations of benevolence" of Christianity be extended to criminals, and that punishment be a means of "restoring" criminals to virtue. This translated into successful pressure on the legislature of Pennsylvania to employ solitary confinement at the first American prison, the Walnut Street Jail (McKelvey 1977:7-8). Following that, in the 1820's the Pennsylvania Society of Friends, a group of Episcopalians and some Quakers, planned the building of the Eastern State
Penitentiary on Cherry Hill in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania penitentiary became the exemplar of the notion of the penitentiary. It took the concept of solitary treatment of prisoners to its most extreme application. Prisoners were kept completely isolated to the point that they were hooded during movements so that they could not even lay eyes on each other. In addition to total isolation, this Protestant design included forced Bible reading as the main mechanism for a prisoner’s redemption (McKelvey 1977:17-18; Hawkins and Alpert 1989:40).

Again, it was not simply punishment that would work on offenders’ rational minds, dissuading them from further law violation, it was specifically the religious exposure that would work on their conscience, prompting them to adopt a moral lifestyle. Foucault interprets the design of the early American prison as an institution hinging upon the individual’s surrender to both institutional discipline and his own conscience:

It’s not [in the Philadelphia model] an external respect for the law or fear of punishment alone that will act upon the convict but the workings of the conscience itself. A profound submission, rather than a superficial training; a change of ‘morality’, rather than of attitude. In the Pennsylvania prison, the only operations of correction were the conscience and the silent architecture that confronted it. At Cherry Hill, ‘the walls are the punishment of the crime; the cell confronts the convict with himself; he is forced to listen to his conscience’...In this closed cell, this temporary sepulchre, the myths of resurrection arise easily enough. After night and silence, the regenerated life. ...Cherry Hill was life annihilated and begun again. Catholicism soon absorbed this Quaker technique into its discourses. [Abbé Petigny writes]’I see your cell as no more than a frightful sepulchre where, instead of worms, remorse and despair come to gnaw at you and to turn your existence into a hell in anticipation. But...what is for an irreligious prisoner merely a tomb, a repulsive ossuary, becomes, for the sincerely Christian convict, the very cradle of blessed immortality’. (Foucault 1979:239)
The Pennsylvania model, with its emphasis on solitary, meditative salvation, had an added advantage which should be noted—it provided very efficient social control.

"Chaplains made periodic rounds, encouraging each prisoner to read his Bible and to cleanse his soul through prayerful repentance, and the officers found themselves only rarely confronted with disciplinary problems.” (McKelvey 1977:29)

Developing just before the Pennsylvania penitentiary, but with some crucial differences, was the Auburn prison. It was originally intended around total solitary confinement, but the high numbers of suicides and mental breakdowns of prisoners forced New York's governor to forsake that design (McKelvey 1977:14). Louis Dwight, who was a devout Christian with strong Puritan values, and the Boston Prison Discipline Society were responsible for the reformulation of the Auburn prison, which featured heavy use of the Bible, Sabbath schools and preaching of the gospel (McKelvey 1977:15-20). While it was as greatly influenced as the Pennsylvania model by the Protestant ideal of saving the souls of prisoners, its methods did not include the same emphasis on isolation. Solitary confinement was used, but during the day, prisoners would labor together.

The salvation of the convict, as conceived by Dwight and the Baptist and the Congregational ministers who rallied to his Society [the Boston Prison Discipline Society], was not the penitence of solitary souls, but the redemption of unfortunate sinners, to be achieved with the aid of revivals and Sabbath schools and through the development of industrious habits under strict discipline in congregate shops. (McKelvey 1977:15)

The Auburn system also differed from the Pennsylvania system in its frequent use of flogging to enforce discipline. In the end, the Auburn system was found to be more
cost-efficient and it was adopted over the Pennsylvania penitentiary as a model for other American prisons throughout the 1800s (Hawkins and Alpert 1989:45).

The influence of Christians was not limited to the design of the early American penitentiaries. As reformers and volunteers, Christians who were involved in the prisons often made their presence felt through charitable efforts which were later institutionalized into the structure of the prison. The Boston Prison Discipline Society, for example, sent missionaries to the early American prisons to ensure that the spiritual needs of the incarcerated were being met. Eventually, these first prison chaplains were seen as essential enough to prison life that they were figured into the state budget as paid prison employees (McKelvey 1977:20). Education in prison, which in the modern era became a standard feature, began with the Sabbath schools mentioned earlier, and the first prison libraries centered around donated Bibles (McKelvey 1977:20,57). By the 1850s, all state prisons had some sort of library, but they generally tended to be comprised of old religious books and, “their service was little more than that of providing an escape to readers bored with the drab realities of their prison home.” (McKelvey 1977:58). So, while the penetration of the spiritual message may or may not have been effective, there is little question that it was there and that its conveyors had an impact on how the prisons operated.

Problems in the American penitentiary of the late 19th Century were plentiful and heralded things to come in the 21st Century. Overcrowding and financial strain were undermining the ideal of the penitentiary as a place of spiritual and personal
transformation. Turning a profit and simply maintaining order began to take precedence. Disciplinary routines in the spirit of religious reform were replaced by heavy work routines and the use of flogging was increasing. By the 1870s, the prisons began to fall under criticism by outsiders – its ideals all but lost, the penitentiary had become little more than a holding pen for criminals (McKelvey 1977:110-111; Hawkins and Alpert 1989:48-49). These failures called for change, and once again it was Christian groups that were the main instigators of penal reform.

In the 1890s charities began to take over duties that the prisons seemed to be doing inadequately, such as providing support to prisoners after release. Christian groups like the Salvation Army and the Volunteers of America dominated this trend which continued to grow in the next century (McKelvey 1977:191-193). Evangelist Maud Ballington Booth who led the Volunteer Prison League (a subgroup of Volunteers of America) used an “emotional appeal” to get prisoners to follow Christian principles and to follow the rules of the prison. Her efforts were extensive and by 1900 she had a body of 2,679 volunteers doing her charitable work in prisons all over the country (McKelvey 1977:185-186).

David Garland writes of the Christian influence in prisons, a considerable portion of which has been in the form of charitable Protestant reforms:

[From the medieval period onwards, Western legal systems have increasingly separated themselves from religious authorities and conceptions, but something of that earlier, religious culture still remains, and, from the Middle Ages right up to the present, religious belief has been an important force in shaping the practice and evolution of punishment...Evangelicals were in the vanguard of reforming movements both in Britain and in the USA, helping to ameliorate conditions of
captivity or to aid prisoners upon their release, and later developing alternatives to imprisonment such as probation, which began as a form of missionary work funded by church-based temperance societies. Even today, churches and religious groups are still in the forefront of those who agitate for penal reform of provide resources for needy offenders, and prison chaplains continue to play a small part in the life of the prisons even if their spiritual and pastoral mission is nowadays limited in its influence and often indistinguishable from the social worker role. (Garland 1990:204)

The historical role of churches in the development and design of the Western correctional model has been recognized, then, by a number of scholars. There is some diversity among these scholars, however, on how to interpret this religious influence. Michael Ignatieff, in a Foucauldian analysis, calls the role of faith groups consistent with the goals of the “propertied and powerful.” He observes that while the Christian groups criticized the abuses and inequities of the penal system, they failed to propose any radical changes. The changes they did effect essentially increased the ability of the state to maintain order and, ironically, decreased public tolerance for the offender by emphasizing the chasm between rich and poor. At the same time, the religious presence in the penal system cloaked the insidious power of the state over the poor and powerless by invoking a divine and charitable justification. “[John] Howard’s success in presenting the reformatory ideal as a vision of humane moral reclamation has obscured its function as a legitimation for an intensification of carceral power” (Ignatieff 1978:212).

Blake McKelvey’s analysis of churches’ roles is more moderate. He does not depict the ironic contribution of Christian missionaries and activists to the oppressive power of the state as the workings of the ruling class, simply disguised as altruism. Rather,
McKelvey portrays these benevolent organizations as operating with “good intentions.” But he acknowledges that charity can be at times misguided, that consequences are often unintended, and that the road to hell may be, as they say, paved with good intentions (McKelvey 1977).

David Garland offers a relevant insight on the topic:

[S]entiments and sensibilities sometimes neatly coincide with interests of apolitical, economic or ideological kind, as, for example, when humane measures also produce greater control and enhanced legitimacy. But sometimes the two pull in opposite directions, and this is where the reality of sensibilities is best revealed: where they show themselves to be a genuine social force, and not just “incidental music” (Garland 1990:197).

So the Christian reformers of the American penal system may have provided “incidental music” more than “genuine social force,” in that they did not lessen state power over the prisoner. But their impact on how the prisoner is viewed and how the correctional system is conceived was great and has an enduring legacy.

From the history of Christian involvement in the prison we can detect an underlying assumption: that each criminal is redeemable, and that good Christians have an obligation to help them back into the grace of God. While this orientation was used to pressure officials for more humane treatment of prisoners, it was equally used to justify a system of ostensibly religious discipline that often involved painful physical punishment. This is because the culpability for criminal offending was seen as entirely individual. In the early 1850s in England, Christian discipline was to make a determined attempt to, as Forsythe writes, “pierce through the worldly [sic], idle and
luxurious propensity to self-indulgence and excitement which it was assumed had been environmentally learned by prisoners” (Forsythe 1987:45). The emphasis here is on fixing the individual, as though he or she were an atomized creature, and as though it were moral failing alone that causes criminal behavior, or, as Rothman puts it, a “moral disease” (Rothman 1980).

In today’s prisons there is no longer forced Bible study and flogging has officially been forbidden, but the overriding theme behind the original American penitentiaries lingers. The originally Protestant ideal that a criminal is an atomized wrongdoer who should be reformed through discipline still guides our “correctional” approach. In the twentieth century, faith-based approaches were replaced by secular attempts to rehabilitate offenders in prison, through therapeutic programs, education and training (Garland 1990, Rothman 1990). These programs are all but completely defunct in our current penal system, but they still stand as another reflection of the Protestant conception that the problem of crime could be ameliorated by the individual reform of incarcerated offenders. When studies refuted this conception (Martinson 1974; Lipton, Martinson et al. 1975), and these programs were abandoned, they were not replaced by approaches that went beyond reforming individuals to consider the structural context of crime. Rather, they were replaced by warehousing and punishment of prisoners who would eventually be released. With no reasonable efforts being made to ensure that they are released having experienced anything that might “correct” their offending, criminal offenders are still expected not to return to prison. It is an almost ridiculous irony that recidivism rates remain the method we
use to assess the effectiveness of a "correctional" system that focuses not at all on correcting, and almost exclusively on punishing.

Moreover, the current American penal approach incarcerates and releases, without truly making any real effort to address the other social problems that work alongside moral failing to create criminal offending. We know that family factors, job supports, economic opportunity and education contribute to criminal offending, but when an individual or a category of people are offending at high rates, the justice system does not move to address these factors. This fact is evidence that our penal approach still abides by a basic assumption that the Christian approach originally put into place: that criminal tendencies will be corrected by a prison sentence. Recidivism rates and testimonies from former inmates seriously challenge this assumption, but it is an enduring legacy of the original faith-based approach to criminal offending.

Religious programming itself, while no longer part of the explicit prison agenda (with a few recent exceptions) still holds a prominent place in the prisoner’s experience. To better understand the reasons behind both the historical role outlined above and religion’s enduring presence in prison today, we turn now to some social theory on religion in general.

General Theories of Religion

Much of the theory of religious behavior focuses on the functions that religion serves. Even theorists that one would be very unlikely to call functionalist tend to include religion’s functions in their discussions of its impact on society. Some of those
functions relate either directly or indirectly to incarceration. In this section, we will begin with theories on the functions of religion pertaining directly or indirectly to the study of religion in prison. We will then, to contextualize the data collected for this study, review some theories and research on religious conversion.

There exists in sociology what a person of faith would potentially recognize as a secular bias. Given the nature of social science, to understand human behavior through observation, that bias might be unavoidable. Considering human behavior in terms of social interaction requires social science to define religious membership, prayer, worship, and even belief itself as social constructs, created and affected by relationship, community, family, status, gender, wealth, race, etc. While there is a good deal of emphasis on understanding the role that belief in God has on people’s actions, there is little room in a sociological analysis of religion for the concept of God as an actual force. Plainly stated, in the sociology of religion, God is irrelevant.

When Karl Marx stated in 1844 that religion was the opiate of the people (Marx and Engels 1964:42), he called for an understanding of religious behavior that would focus on power relations, and he set the tone for how sociologists would approach the topic. As Niebuhr writes in the introduction to a collection of writings by Marx and Engels on religion, “In religion we have the final claim to absolute truth; Marx and Engels are social scientists, interested empirically in the way that the claim of the absolute is used as a screen for particular competitive historical interests” (Niebuhr
1964:vii). They are not interested in ascertaining whether or not the absolute claim to truth is actually true. Nor is any social scientist.

Marx has been criticized as being too dismissive of people’s religious contentions (Heirich 1977), and as being too simplistic in his conception (Weber 1976; Weber 1978; Schluchter 1989). But he is not the only social scientist with a secular bias. Even Durkheim’s claim that society is becoming more secular (Durkheim 1984) can be seen as part of what now exists in social science in general as a tendency to dismiss certain aspects of faith. Concerned, quite naturally, with empirical, measurable social phenomena, the social sciences consider religion in those terms. While this may be perfectly appropriate, it is a bias we as social scientists should be aware of because in only looking at what is clearly measurable, social science may at times render the messy, complicated topic of faith artificially sterile. Or it may avoid it altogether.

As we will see later, faith in prison has been studied surprisingly infrequently, especially considering its historic significance. When it has been studied, it has been reduced to oversimplified terms that don’t allow the nuances of individual faith to be discussed. Here I am not suggesting that social science begin to concern itself with the existence of God, or the truth of any other faith-based claims. I simply suggest that we become more conscious of this bias in our approach to the topic, and that we listen more closely to our subjects when they speak of their spiritual realities. Conscientious sociologists should try to understand the phenomena of religious
conversion, religious commitment, loss of religious faith, secularization and other religious trends, without dismissing either the perceived realities of participants, nor the power discrepancies that religious institutions sometimes serve to rationalize. In this review of social theories of religion, we will see how sociology tends toward secular analyses of religion. We will also look at the current trend toward rational choice theory in the sociology of religion, and how these theorists expressly attempt to distance themselves from the secular bias by depicting faith choices as rational acts.

It should be acknowledged that most sociologists have been able to draw upon one insight that is clearly articulated in Marx's writings on religion: that religion functions to alleviate human suffering. Thomas O'Dea and Janet O'Dea Aviad state that religion provides a transcendent experience to compensate for and assist in adjustment to the "frustration and deprivation" which result from the uncertainty (contingency), powerlessness and scarcity inherent in human existence (O'Dea and Aviad 1983:5). Similarly, Wolfgang Schluchter, a Weberian, writes that religious action "establishes or maintains a sacred cosmos by trying to control uncontrollable contingencies" (Schluchter 1989:252). Logically, the less control one has in one's life, the larger a role religion would be expected to play. In To Comfort and To Challenge, Glock, Ringer and Babbie expand on this idea as they formulate the "comfort hypothesis" to explain differences in religious involvement. "Parishioners whose life situations most deprive them of prestige and gratification in the secular society are the most involved in the church. The church, then, [is] characterized as an
alternative source of rewards for the socially deprived” (Glock, Ringer et al. 1967:109). Later William Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, in a number of publications, refer to religion as a “compensator” for pain and disappointment (Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Bainbridge 1997; Collins 1997; Stark 1997; Stark and Finke 2000), and this becomes a building block for Stark’s comprehensive rational choice theory of religious conversion and commitment (Stark and Finke 2000).

Stark and Bainbridge’s notion of compensators complements Peter Berger’s influential *The Sacred Canopy* where he writes that the “most important function of society is nomization,” or the creation of *nomos*, order (Berger 1967:22). The very nature of social structure is unstable and produces fears of meaninglessness, which are remedied by the creation of a cosmology that includes a higher power and a higher order. Separation from society, whether symbolic or physical, presents further psychological suffering and danger of meaninglessness. Enter, religion: “The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order” (Berger 1967:26). Like Berger, most social theorists who consider religion make some acknowledgement of religion’s capacity to allay human anguish, a capacity visited often in the data from this study.

While aspects of Berger’s presentation could be criticized as overestimating consensus, a common critique of functionalist theory, his understanding of religion’s functions recognizes power differentials. He borrows from Max Weber as he
contends that religion *legitimizes* social institutions, and that a *theodicy* operates to explain and rationalize suffering and social inequality. He further states that religious symbols are almost always used to legitimate state-sanctioned violence (Berger 1967:45), a point that helps to illuminate the historical role of religion in the penal system.

Weber’s term theodicy is consistent with Marx’s analytic approach of understanding religious behavior in terms of power relations. Weber differentiates the “theodicy of fortune,” a set of religious ideas which justify the status quo (used by the privileged), from the “theodicy of suffering,” a set of religious ideas which establish hope for salvation (used by the unprivileged) (Weber 1976:271-273). But Max Weber offers a view of religion that is more nuanced than Marx’s. For Weber religion is not just an other-worldly escape, or simply something that allows subordinated people to continue in that position without questioning order. Weber certainly acknowledges that status and power differentials correspond to the function and other-worldly orientation of a religion, but an important distinction is Weber’s emphasis that religion generally assists people in this world. “The most elementary forms of behavior motivated by religious...factors are oriented to *this* world" (Weber 1978:399, emphasis original). He also states that religiously-motivated behavior is “relatively rational behavior,” and that the ends of religious actions are “predominantly economic” (Weber 1978:400). In other words, religion may play a role in how we act to serve our own needs and interests.
From this perspective, religion's influence is not limited to social integration. But social integration is one of the primary functions religion is seen as serving in traditional sociological theories. Even Marx and Weber, though their perspective is critical, point out that, by making differentials in power and wealth legitimate and divinely ordered, religion allows even a highly stratified society to maintain itself with minimal disruption to authority. But it is Emile Durkheim who specifically looked for sources of social integration in religion. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim asserts that religion (at least in "primitive" societies) coheres groups of people, giving them a common symbolic order and a common set of rules (Durkheim 1954).

Durkheim also sees society as increasingly secular, however, but believes that other forms of solidarity can continue to develop and create moral direction as religion diminishes (Durkheim 1984:119-121). Among these is punishment. For Durkheim, the value of punishment is not its impact on the individual being punished, but its power to create a sense of solidarity among the punishing public. Punishment is an explicit expression of the *moral* order, a public outcry of *moral* condemnation (Durkheim 1961). Penal systems and religious institution, then, are intertwined, and one could easily extrapolate, as Berger does, that religion will not only be involved in the creation of penal law because it is the original source of morality, but that it will

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3 Rather, this perspective suggests that religion can act as a motivator for change, and economic change, at that. This more open view of religion leaves room for the possibility that religion might actually act as a force for social change at times. Indeed, there exists in the literature ample evidence that substantial human movements for social change have been informed, inspired, and facilitated by religious thought and organization (Ong 1987; Lincoln & Mamiya 1990; Smith 1996; Osa 1996; Morris 1996; Nepstad 1996; Nash 1996; Gardell 1996; Wilmore 1998).
be present in the execution of penal policy. If violence (physical or symbolic)
offends the conscience collective, then it must be punished. Punishment that is also
violent (physically or symbolically) presents a contradiction. Only religious
traditions and convictions, from whence the moral order originates, can assure the
conscience collective that the punitive action is proper.

According to this array of theories, alleviation of pain or fear (especially prompted by
separation from society), maintenance of power differentials, promotion of self-
interest, strengthening of social integration, and reinforcement of the rectitude of
penal policy are all functions of religion. They are also clearly related to
imprisonment, and may help to explain the presence of religion in prison, historically
and currently.

An effect of religion’s presence in prison is that inmates convert while they’re there.
We turn now to some theories on religious conversion.

Theories and Research on Religious Conversion

In 1900, Edwin Starbuck conducted qualitative research on religious conversion. His
findings were published in his own book (Starbuck 1900), but more widely read in
philosopher William James’s Varieties of Religious Experience (James 1982).
Starbuck found religious conversion to be largely associated with adolescence. He
also found backsliding to be a rather common phenomenon among his 100
evangelical Christian converts, with over 80% experiencing a notable decline in
religious enthusiasm (Starbuck 1900:356-360).
Along with frequent citations of Starbuck’s work, William James’s now famous book, originally published in 1902, offers original theorizing on religious conversion, as well. Like some of the other theorists, James sees the pursuit of faith as often associated with emotional despair.

There are only two ways in which it is possible to get rid of anger, worry, fear, despair, or other undesirable affections. One is that an opposite affection should overwhelmingly break over us, and the other is by getting so exhausted with the struggle that we have to stop, so we drop down, give up and don’t care any longer. Our emotional brain-centres strike work, and we lapse into a temporary apathy. (James 1982:212)

And he sees religious conversion as the unification of the divided self.

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This is at least what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about. (James 1982:189)

Unlike the early sociological theories of religion, James’s work is not biased toward the secular. As the quote above demonstrates, he leaves room for the possibility that the power of God is not necessarily divine, but emphasizes, nevertheless, that this power can be completely transformative to the individual who experiences or perceives it (James 1982).

James uses conversion testimonies to illustrate the unification of the divided self, pointing out that conversion is often preceded by a “sense of sin” and depression. Although he emphasizes the positive effects that religious conversion must have on the psyche, James uses Starbuck’s data to acknowledges the potential impermanence
of conversion. He also, unlike his successors in the field, attempts to get a handle on this concept of *transformation*.

Our ordinary alterations of character, as we pass from one of our aims to another are not commonly called transformations, because each of them is so rapidly succeeded by another in the reverse direction; but whenever one aim grows so stable as to expel definitively its previous rivals from the individual's life, we tend to speak of the phenomenon, and perhaps to wonder at it, as a 'transformation.' (James 1982:194)

William James has probably been more influential in the field of psychology than sociology. But not all of the psychologists who reference James's (and Starbuck's) work adopt the same approach vis-à-vis secular bias. Leon Salzman, for example, uses a distinction introduced by James between volitional and spontaneous conversion, but his analysis takes a different course, naming the latter a "pseudo-solution." In James's terms, a spontaneous conversion is somewhat unconscious and often sudden, usually precipitated by crisis, but it is still an integrative undertaking. In Salzman's concept, this sort of less intellectual crisis-driven conversion does not "integrate" the divided self, but simply gives the pathological mind a different outlet for its neurotic obsessions—evangelicals and religious zealots fall into this category. And psychological theories generally concur with Starbuck that conversion in general tends to happen during adolescence, because of the turmoil typically associated with that period of life (Salzman 1953; Fowler 1995).

Sociologists have had less interest in identifying age or pathologizing converts than they have in mapping out how and why people convert to religion. Framing it not as
a generalizable theory, but as a “reasonable starting point,” John Lofland and Rodney Stark offer this list of conditions for conversion:

For conversion a person must:

1) Experience enduring, acutely felt tensions
2) Within a religious problem-solving perspective,
3) Which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker;
4) Encountering the [religious group] at a turning point in his life;
5) Wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts;
6) Where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized;
7) And, where, if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction. (Lofland and Stark 1965:874)

Writing much later, in 1993, Lewis Rambo provides a similar, though differently ordered, model for religious conversion. According to Rambo, the precursor to religious conversion is usually an ongoing process of searching for and creating meaning. He calls this a “quest,” generally intensified in times of crisis, and theoretically similar to Lofland and Stark’s first and fourth conditions. Time constraints on an individual from work and family, etc. (structural availability), ties to a previous life (emotional availability), an individual’s compatibility with the intellectual framework of new religion (intellectual availability), and moral compatibility between new religion and previous life (religious availability) can all be crucial to the religious quest (Rambo 1993:56-63). Rambo’s emotional availability corresponds to Lofland and Stark’s condition six, neutralized or absent ties, and his intellectual and moral availability correspond to Lofland and Stark’s religious problem-solving perspective. Rambo’s quest is the “encounter,” which can involve dominance (as where a militarily powered missionary crusade is involved), or can be
unassuming and tolerant. Notably, a religious advocate's efforts to convert begin with encounters with the people who occupy the margins of the context (Rambo 1993:91-101). Rambo's model is in fact quite elaborate and goes beyond Lofland and Stark's list of conditions to actually present a generalizable model for religious conversion. His debt to Lofland and Stark and the parallel insights, however, are clear.

In addition to providing this model for the conditions for conversion, which has been widely used in sociological analyses of religious conversion, Lofland and Stark's work introduces the idea that religion need not be seen exclusively as a socially-integrative, conformity-producing institution, as the earliest sociological theories imply, but that religious membership can equally be a deviant choice (Lofland and Stark 1965). Though he launches his research as a criticism of the Lofland-Stark model, David Snow also notes that some religious groups are "respectable" while others are "idiosyncratic," and that the conversion process may differ accordingly (Snow and Phillips 1980). In their research on Nichiren Shoshu, Snow and Phillips mention that the converts they studied characterized their lives before conversion as problematic and tense, but Snow and Phillips feel the Lofland-Stark model over-emphasizes the pre-existing tension (Snow and Phillips 1980). Warning that researchers should not use the Lofland-Stark model to "confuse natural histories with causal processes" (Snow and Machalek 1984), David Snow critiques the model as not putting enough emphasis on the impact of affective bonds with members of the faith
community on the new convert (Snow and Phillips 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984; Machalek and Snow 1985).

Moving forward from there, Stark and Bainbridge focus directly on the affective bonds within religious groups in formulating the *moral communities hypothesis*, which has more to do with the relationship between deviance and religiosity than with conversion, and is covered in the next subsection. It is worth mentioning here only to demonstrate that Rodney Stark’s theorizing and research on the phenomenon of religious conversion (and religious commitment in general) did not stop with the Lofland-Stark model. According to Stark, society is not becoming increasingly secular (Stark and Glock 1968), as the Durkheim-inspired secularization theories would have us believe, and a paradigm-shift is in order in the sociology of religion (Stark 1997). He also feels that sociology should move away from dismissing religious behavior as irrational. Along with other colleagues, Stark has spearheaded a movement to apply rational choice theory to the study of religion (Gartrell and Shannon 1985; Iannaccone 1995; Ammerman 1997; Collins 1997; Finke 1997; Hechter 1997; Iannaccone 1997; Sherkat 1997; Stark 1997; Warner 1997; Young 1997; Young 1997; Stark and Finke 2000).

The most comprehensive publication on the rational choice approach to religion is the 2000 book, *Acts of Faith: Examining the Human Side of Religion* by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (Stark and Finke 2000). This book introduces some key concepts that build on the body of theory reviewed above. Expanding, though not explicitly,
on Weber's premise of religious behavior being largely rational behavior, this theoretical approach frames religious involvement in economic-sounding terms of cost and benefit. Like Lofland and Stark, Rambo, and Starbuck and James before them, the rational choice approach recognizes that crisis plays a part in the religious convert's path. It also describes the importance of affective bonds, but uses the term social capital to denote the value of both "neutralized extra-cult attachments" and relationships with faith group members. The "religious problem-solving perspective" concept is refined substantially in the new concept of religious capital. While these premises all sound like familiar, more polished versions of earlier theories, there is an important distinction in the rational choice approach to religion. That is, rather obviously, its ceaseless insistence on understanding religious behavior as rational behavior, executed in the perceived self-interests of the actor.

Whether or not it is, as its proponents insist, the new frontier in the sociology of religion, the rational choice approach raises interesting issues and offers ease of use in its economic terminology. It includes a more sophisticated articulation of many of the ideas presented in the conversion research and theory and as such is of great utility in considering religious conversion. In the end, despite pitting itself against secularization theories, rational choice theory is no less biased toward the secular than Marxist, Weberian or Durkheimian approaches, and for the study of religion's role in

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macro-level inequalities it offers little. It cannot answer every question, but it may offer some innovative ways to look at religion among criminal offenders.

**Deviance, Religion and Prison**

Andrew Skotnicki writes in a recent essay, “Much of what is written regarding crime from the scholarly viewpoint has a prescriptive tone normally not found in the sociology of religion.” (Skotnicki 2002:205). As it is the usual occupation of scholars concerned with crime to find *solutions* to the phenomenon they are studying, implicitly identifying it as a *social problem*, this observation rings quite true. What tone, then, would one expect to see in scholarly writings on crime in relation to religion? Almost without exception, the studies on deviance and religion, or religion and prison emanate from a deep-rooted expectation to uncover the pro-social influence of religion in the life of the offender, or would-be offender, and the conclusions these studies draw indeed tend to be “prescriptive.”

Early research on religion and crime concluded, unexpectedly, that religion (measured by church and Sunday school attendance and belief in “hellfire”) did not prevent delinquency (Hirschi and Stark 1969). This conclusion called into question the long-held and common-sense assumption that religion is an integrative force, bringing about pro-social and conforming behavior and attitudes. It also set the tone for future research that would now have to use different methods to find evidence supporting the functionalist and common-sense notion that religiosity and deviance should be inversely related.
Further research did conclude that social participation and involvement in a religious community may result in social control (Stark, Doyle et al. 1980; Welch and Tittle 1991; Evans, Cullen et al. 1995; Stark and Bainbridge 1996). Rodney Stark resurrected the originally Durkheimian term “moral community” (Stark, Doyle et al. 1980) to redefine religion as a primarily a “group property,” rather than simply an individual characterization (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:72). When Rodney Stark teamed up with William Bainbridge to reconsider the effects of (mostly Christian) religion on various forms of deviance (including delinquency) they found a positive correlation between religion and social integration (Stark and Bainbridge 1996).

Stark and Bainbridge specifically mention that their findings are encouraging for groups like Colson’s prison ministry or the Nation of Islam to establish strong prison subcultures and morally influence criminals (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:184). Another study on the possible effects of religion on adult criminality concluded that, at least for its all-white, again primarily Christian, urban sample, religious activities were a predictive factor against self-reported criminal behavior (Evans, Cullen et al. 1995). So there is some evidence, after all, that religion may prevent social and criminal deviance, particularly where the religiosity of the surrounding community is taken into consideration by the researcher. In other words, this research suggests that it is the moral community, perhaps even more than the actual religious practices or beliefs, that influence an individual’s likelihood for offending.

The small but growing body of research on religion in prison proceeds, once again, from the assumption that religion is socially-integrative. The starting point for this research is the familiar premise that the moral influence of religion not only prevents, but can also correct criminal behavior. In 1987 Byron Johnson’s study of institutional adjustment among prisoners in Florida, measured against self-reported and chaplain-confirmed religiousness, found no relationship (Johnson 1987). In 1992, Todd Clear studied inmates in 20 prisons across the country and concluded that religiousness was related to institutional adjustment and lower rates of prison infraction, but only before controlling for age, self-esteem and race (Clear et al. 1992), hence, the results did not conclusively support the thesis.
Also in 1992, Harry Dammer (who was on Todd Clear’s 1992 team) completed and published his dissertation, which considered both the causes for and the effects of religious involvement through an ethnographic approach. He found a variety of motives for male inmates’ religious involvement, some “sincere” and some “insincere,” and concluded that for the “sincerely” religious, religion successfully contributes to social control in the prison setting.

The sincerely religious inmate is more calm, under control, and disciplined than his non-religious ‘convict’ counterpart. The sincerely religious inmate does not read pornographic material, avoided prison homosexuality, gambling, and the many ‘con’ games which might create conflict among other inmates and staff. While the sincere inmate is avoiding illicit behavior, he is modeling his behavior in a manner which is more aligned with pro-social norms. (Dammer 1992:280)

In 2002, Dammer conducted another study of (male) inmate motivations for religious program involvement, and further developed his definition of the “insincere” inmate who attends services for one or more of the following reasons: “protection, inmate convergence, interaction with women volunteers, and access to prison resources” (Dammer 1992:43). Presumably, the “insincerity” of certain inmates might account for the absence of a consistent relationship between religious participation and fewer infractions.

The research of Thomas O’Connor and a team of researchers from the Center for Social Research logically follows the above studies that consider religion as an instrument of social control in prison, by considering its effects after release. This

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5 His earlier study (1992) had included “parole board effect” among the “insincere” motivations for involvement. Ten years later, he found very few inmates claiming that others attended faith services for this reason, but he found that many correctional officers still held this view.
team considered only Christian men (Prison Fellowship Ministries, or PFM) and concluded that simply being involved with a religious group in prison did not necessarily mean that an offender's behavior would change (as measured by chance of re-arrest in the two years following release). However, for the devout (prisoners who participated intensely in Christian ministry programs during their incarceration), there was a measurable decrease in the likelihood of recidivism (O'Connor, Ryan et al. 1996). The same conclusions were reached by Byron Johnson et al in 1997 also studying PFM participation. Johnson also noted that, paradoxically, PFM inmates were in fact more likely to have infractions on their prison records than were non-Christian inmates (Johnson, Larson et al. 1997).

More recently, O'Connor and Perreyclear conducted another study with the purpose of finding a correlation between religious participation in prison and lower prison infractions. Consistent with previous findings, they found that among the men in their South Carolina prison, “there was no difference between the religious and non-religious groups in their likelihood of having an infraction” (O'Connor and Perreyclear 2002:26), but that “the more religious sessions the men had, the better chance they had of having no infractions” (O'Connor and Perreyclear 2002:27).

Todd Clear, along with colleague Melvina Sumter, also published again on the topic in 2002. Their study was of 769 men across 12 prisons. Religiosity (regardless of faith affiliation) was found to be associated with lower instances of disciplinary confinement, for those inmates who qualified as “devout” according to a scale
derived from the "Prisoner Values Survey." Their findings, however, varied greatly across the 12 prisons, and, again, did not conclusively support the thesis (Clear and Sumter 2002).

There is some common-sense logic to considering the order-producing effects of religion in the prison. And by some accounts, religion does contribute to a level of docility among prisoners. Since "Peace and quiet are the first order of business in prison..." (Kassebaum, Ward et al. 1971:vii), anything which helps to maintain order would be seen as positive to prison administrators, whether it inhibits simple fighting or outright rebellion. A captain at a Florida prison reported that he enjoys visits from the Bill Glass prison ministry, a Christian evangelical group, which proselytizes in prisons around the country, because it leaves prisoners "mellowed out" and "more polite" (Burnett 1996). Entirely consistent with statements from the faith-based prison workers of the 18th and 19th Centuries, Harry Dammer's conclusion supports this idea, saying that prisoners who are "sincere" in their religious involvement are more "under control" (Dammer 1992:277-280).

There exists, historically as well as currently, an underlying belief that even the "hardened criminal" can be reached by a religious message. This is one reason that religious programs consume a sizable share of correctional program budgets (Dammer 1992:269). It may also explain why prison administrators seem to be increasingly open to the idea of allowing religious community members into the locked gates for the purpose of reforming prisoners (Burnett 1996; O'Connor 2002;
Goddard 2003; Farrington 2004). Even some social scientists, like Todd Clear and John Dilulio, are returning to the idea that religion is the solution to criminality and the prison context is the logical place for this remedy to be applied (Dilulio 1990; Clear and Myrhe 1996; Dionne and John Dilulio 2000; Dilulio 2001; Dilulio 2001; Clear and Sumter 2002).

However, it must be acknowledged that the results of these studies are somewhat mixed and do little to endorse a general assumption that religious induction functions consistently as a preventive for criminal behavior. The studies do point to high levels of involvement in religious programming as being associated with lower levels of rule-violation and recidivism, but they cannot establish a direct causal relationship.

As Byron Johnson notes, after finding high level PF participants to have a lower likelihood of recidivating,

"Another possible interpretation is that because high participants were more likely to be "already committed in their faith," we may be observing a selection effect. Consequently one could argue that participation in Bible study is most frequent among inmates most strongly committed to succeeding after release. Even such an interpretation, however, would suggest that religious commitment may be related to other factors that enhance postrelease success. (Johnson, Larson et al. 1997)

Furthermore, there is nothing in the literature on faith-based programming that suggests that high participation in faith-based programming has an exclusive domain on reducing recidivism. In other words, high levels of participation in programs unrelated to faith (such as educational or therapeutic groups) might also show significant correlations to improved post-release outcomes. The only comparisons that have been done between secular prison programs (which are few these days) and
faith-based programming generally show how much less the faith-based programs cost (because they are often staffed by volunteers or inmates themselves) (O'Connor and Perreyclear 2002; Petersilia 2003).

What is therefore clearly in order is more research on the topic. The new research should include more consideration of Muslims and other religious groups, since the vast majority of what has been studied has been limited to Christian groups. The new research should also include women, as nearly none of the studies so far have considered gender as a variable. Finally, because the questions with which the prior research leaves the reader are ones of process and causation, the research body would be enhanced by more qualitative studies. Dammer’s research is qualitative and his two are the only studies among those listed above that provide any insight into why the quantitative studies consistently show no association between simply participating in religious programs and having more positive outcomes. While my dissertation takes issue with some of Dammer’s conclusions, the contribution of a qualitative study that considers what the actual prisoners and staff have to say on the matter is undeniably valuable.

The call for more qualitative studies is supported by Stark and Bainbridge who, having just concluded that religion as it pertains to reform is among the “most neglected” relevant topics, wrote in 1996, (just prior to some of the research cited above):

As a first step, it ought to be possible to examine some prison populations closely to identify converts to various religions and subsequently to compare their rates of
recidivism with other prisoners. If a religious effect on reform can be isolated, then it would seem appropriate to invest in more intensive studies, including field research, to identify the fundamental mechanisms involved. (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:185)

In this section, we reviewed the historical role of faith in prison, as something that contributed to order and informed the very method of incarceration and release, with an assumption of transformation during incarceration. We saw how sociological theories of religion have focused on crisis and suffering as catalysts to religious seeking and conversion. We looked at the role of affective bonds in people’s tendency to convert and in their tendency to conform to social norms once converted. And we looked at the body of research on crime, faith and incarceration to see that all of the aforementioned interesting theories of religion and conversion have not produced a lot of theoretically rich research in the area of prison religion. Indeed, whether it is Weberian or Marxist analysis of how religion maintains power differentials, or Stark and Lofland’s conditions for conversion, or the rational choice school’s cost/benefit analysis, relevant theory is consistently missing from the research on religion in prison.

Clear, Johnson, Dammer, O’Connor and their teams made the first step, to which Stark and Bainbridge refer above. The current piece of research proceeds from there, into the field, for a closer look at said “mechanisms,” drawing on the insights provided by decades of theorizing on the subject of religion. I thereby hope to make an original contribution to the literature, since this study’s primary purpose is not to address the, as Skotnicki says, “prescriptive” questions to which criminology often limits itself, and to which the above studies are generally directed, but to understand the process by which prisoners turn to faith, the meaning they create, and the contradictions inherent in our conventional interpretations of faith and incarceration. In order to do this, a more qualitative methodology is required.

**Methods**

In the following section, I outline the qualitative approach I take in this study, offering an illustrative example of the kind of data that comprise the study. I also describe how I gathered the sample and collected the data.

**Qualitative Approach**

As this study attempts to appreciate the complexity of religion in prison, not simply testing its tendency to promote law-abidance, but asking why and how prisoners
become involved in religion, and how religion involves them, it is more suited to ethnographic methods than to traditional positivistic approaches. The decision to take a qualitative approach to the phenomenon of faith in prison came from two different motivations. The first is that the majority of studies that have already been conducted on the subject take a quantitative approach, attempting to discern an inverse relationship between faith participation and criminal behavior, but doing little to explain the complexity of this relationship, where it exists at all. Secondly, it seems to me that religion, as prisoners experience it, is culture. Culture is diffuse, constantly evolving, and elusive. It cannot be easily captured or quantified. Tracking the words and actions of the individuals who are in the process of creating and recreating this culture allows their voices to speak for themselves, and an image of the cultural phenomena in question emerges more clearly.

So, given that the study should be qualitative, I set out to design an ethnographic study. Robert Emerson advises that the researcher immerse herself in “others’ worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important” (Emerson, Fretz, et al.1995:2). But obtaining permission from the California Department of Corrections to conduct an extensive study of inmate religious participation proved prohibitively problematic. It became clear after 6 months of dialogue with the department that my study was unlikely to be approved any time soon. A far more practical tact appeared to be identifying participants who were either prison faith workers or felons already out of prison and setting up unstructured interviews with them. Since Fontana and Frey call the in-depth, unstructured, open-ended, face-to-
face sessions that would comprise my research ethnographic interviews (Fontana and Frey 2003), I felt I was still in the ballpark of ethnographic research. This was further supported by Atkinson and Hammersly who list the features of social research typically oriented to ethnographic methods:

- A strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them
- A tendency to work primarily with ‘unstructured’ data, that is, data that have not been coded at the point of data collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories
- Investigation of a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail
- Analysis of data that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions, the product of which mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994:248)

This study fits the above description. I do not begin with any set hypotheses and I rely primarily on unstructured data, derived chiefly from ethnographic interviews. Not explicitly constructing hypotheses from established theory on religion in prison, or faith conversion in general, I deliberately went into my interviews with a list of questions that I hoped would prompt open and extended monologues from the interviewees. In the opinion of Fontana and Frey, the difference between structured and unstructured interviews is that “the former aims at capturing precise data of a codable nature in order to explain behavior within preestablished categories, whereas the latter is used in an attempt to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (Fontana & Frey 1994: 366). Denzin echoes the idea that understanding a complex set of phenomena can be hampered by imposing theoretical categories,
"preoccupation with prior theory can stand in the way of the researcher's attempts to hear and listen to the interpretive theories that operate in the situations studied" (Denzin 1994:500).

Skotnicki further warns that in the context of studying the incarcerated, especially as pertains to religious practice and meaning, "inmates themselves often do not speak to any significant degree, due to a lack of attentiveness to translation, context, and meaning which has clouded many sociological reports" (Skotnicki 2002:200).

In heed of such admonitions, the proposed research project has been conceptualized as an inductive, qualitative study. The data it captures are not formally coded and quantified, but rather, themes that emerge from the interviews themselves, and to a lesser degree from field notes, are provided as direct quotes.

With no *a priori* categorizations, however, a researcher runs the risk of confronting a cumbersome mass of raw data, with no starting point for analysis. Huberman and Miles emphasize that qualitative research will be facilitated by having a balance between grounded theory and a theory-driven approach. They recommend that some data management plan be considered before entering the field. "Our definition of data analysis contains three linked subprocesses (Huberman and Miles 1994): data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. These processes occur before data collection, during study design and planning; during data collection as interim and early analyses are carried out; and after data collection as final products..."
are approached and completed” (Huberman and Miles 1994:428-429). They also stress, however, that theory alone cannot inform analysis: “Grounded theory acknowledges one important point: Analysis will be undifferentiated and disjointed until the researcher has some local acquaintance with the setting. This is also the case for theory-driven approaches. Seeing how a construct works in the field takes time, especially because its instances are often fleeting, masked by other features, or take shapes different from those found in the research literature or in the lab” (Huberman and Miles 1994:432).

The theoretical framework for this project is, therefore, envisioned as something to help provide a degree of order and limitation to the inquiry, while remaining loose enough that the setting itself can be seen. Data are extracted according to these themes but reported verbatim and in context whenever possible. The importance and appropriateness of this sort of approach is stated very clearly in this passage by Barbara Tedlock:

Ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context. It is not simply the production of new information or research data, but rather the way in which such information or data are transformed into a written or visual form. As a result, it combines research design, field work, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives. (Tedlock 2003:165)

So ethnographic data cannot be divorced from the historical, political, and personal circumstances of the people who are providing them. Glaser and Strauss advise that the researcher should describe the social world being studied, “so vividly...that the reader can almost literally see and hear its people” (Glaser and Strauss 1965: 290).
To illustrate how these data are situated in very personal stories, we will now look at an excerpt of Bill Roberts’s story. One of the 18 participants in this study who found faith while in prison, Bill offered an account that is particularly lucid and touches many of the themes that come up consistently in the data. This first piece of data should give the reader an idea of how participants’ words become data that then are interpreted by the researcher with benefit of past research and theory as gentle guides.

**Bill Roberts**

I met Bill Roberts at a noisy, popular Mexican restaurant at about 5pm. Bill is a white man in his mid-forties, well-spoken and polite. As we sat down, he explained that he had suffered through a long day without eating and he ordered some food. I proceeded through my questions. He answered them easily and offered more details than I had asked for when it came to his criminal past, which included years of using cocaine and methamphetamine, and later “cooking” and distributing methamphetamine. He also described a number of incidents involving firearms and violent confrontations over drug transactions. When I got to the question about how he first embraced his faith, he proffered this uninterrupted account of his reluctant advance toward Jesus Christ:

I was sitting in a county jail. The federal indictment alleged a conspiracy that ran for years and involved allegations of significant amounts of dope. The federal sentencing guidelines are driven by quantity...so the guidelines of this conspiracy ran me between 20 and life, and that was really unsettling to me. So I spent a lot of time in the law library, and when I wasn’t there I was sitting on the bench reflecting, “What is an altar boy, eagle scout, alcoholic addict doing heading off for 20 years to life?” So, and I didn’t have a lot of good answers. And it was the only time I thought about it because it was the only time I had ever been clean. I

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6 This is a pseudonym.
had always had some sort of alcohol or some kind of dope driving me. So I was looking for a defense to the sentence, because I couldn’t have a defense to the alleged crimes because there were too many people willing to testify...and I did a lot of the stuff that they said. So I was guilty of that, I just didn’t want to be guilty of a sentence of 20 to life. So I was looking for a way out...

Bill began by describing incarceration as “unsettling.” This matter-of-fact tone remained as he explained his initial, rather utilitarian motivation for attending chapel services.

So I spent money on psychological evaluations [trying to] mitigate my sentence...But I just didn’t qualify for anything...In the meantime, the only way I could get out of my cell – I was on 24-hour lock-down, you only get one hour out a day – the only way I could get out of that cell was to go to AA meetings, or to go to a Bible study. I went to an AA meeting and I hated it. It seemed like there were a lot of guys just whining about their circumstances. They’d get busted and have to spend a weekend in jail, and they’d be crying about it, and they were really just doing it to improve their sentence, as well, and I just had a hard time listening to weekend whiners when I’m looking at 20 to life. So the next time I had an opportunity to leave the cell, I would go to Bible study. At that point I determined, “OK, I know of God. I think I believe He exists, and if this is what God wants for me, I want to know why. If this is what God’s all about, I’m going to ask him straight-up myself, what is going on? Why is all this occurring like this? Who are You? You’re supposed to be a God of love, this don’t look like much love to me!” I just wanted to have a good discussion, a good debate, and I thought a God debate would be a good one, so I thought I would pick on the chaplain.

Uninterested in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and looking for a chance to challenge God or his representative, Bill began slowly to develop a relationship with the Protestant chaplain.

The chaplain, God praise him, would be able to say this just as well as I would. I came into the Bible study, and apparently I had a look of significant challenge. He would say that he felt some fear that I would have a bad influence on the rest of the group and I might significantly challenge him to where he couldn’t defend, if you will – like God needs defense – but he couldn’t defend God and the Bible and why people should change their life...I don’t remember all the conversations we had, but pretty much he’d start someplace in the Bible and I’d challenge him on its veracity, you know “This is a bunch of hooey!” But I was probably using stronger terms than that...[I would say], “Oh, Jesus rose from the dead? Do you want to explain that one to me? Oh, the stone just rolls away?” And [he said] “Well, you know, it’s just got to be faith.” [And I would say], “Faith? What?
You’re asking me to have faith? I’m looking at 20 to life and you want me to have faith in what? Explain it to me.” So it was a very challenging situation…I really wanted some answers. What I really wanted more than anything, I found out, was that I was on a lifelong quest for just some simple truth…The Bible didn’t work initially. Cause I was reading it much like I read the psychology books. I was looking for an excuse to justify, and I could find too many things wrong with it. Ultimately, I ended up with a stack about 4-foot high of psychology and a Bible sitting next to it, pretty well depressed. I determined I had no way out. I hadn’t really given much thought to doing 20 to life because I didn’t like that idea at all. And I just got really depressed.

At this point, Bill began to choke up and paused for a while. After recomposing himself, he continued.

I haven’t gone there in a while. So I was, I guess I did what anyone else would do in that situation. I just yelled. I yelled. I gave God one more chance. I said, “If You really do exist, You better show Yourself!” Then I had another alternative, and that was to not go anywhere. I could take my life if I wanted to…So I just told God, “If You’re really there, if You’re anything like [the chaplain] described, if You do love us all, and it is Your will that none should perish, then You better show up and show up soon!” And, um—

Again, Bill’s words faltered as he appeared to be fighting back tears. After a shorter pause, he resumed.

I went to another Bible study because I liked [the chaplain] and, aside from the fact that he hadn’t helped me much, I liked him because he was honest…And I knew that when he said something he believed it with his full being…So in a sense he became a friend. Then I was a lot nicer to him and we could actually have a conversation. I told him how I felt—

For a third time, Bill’s emotion caught in his throat, momentarily interrupting his account.

And he said, he asked me if I would just give the Word another shot. He told me, “You know, you remind me of one of the writers of the Gospel named Mark. Do me a favor, just start with Mark, just read Mark”…As I’m reading…I think it’s in the book of John somewhere it describes how the apostles followed Jesus after he was captured, and Jesus was being interrogated in the palace, and there was a bonfire outside and Peter was warming himself at the fire, and Jesus’ prophecy of Peter came true. He said “You will deny me three times before the cock crows.” And he did! And I already knew that Peter was a significant character to Jesus…You know these guys are really tight, and Jesus said, “You’re going to deny me.” And Peter said, “No, not me, Lord.” But he did! And man, I bolted up and slapped the Bible shut and I was alive! You know why? Because in my
mind, and I said it out loud, “I know that rat! I know that rat! How could he do that?” And the word became alive to me...I see this from day to day, I see this all the time, and then it just came flooding over me...I shared that with [the chaplain] and he said, “Oh yeah! Think about this: don’t you think Jesus had a dysfunctional childhood?” I said, “What are you talking about, man? That’s Jesus!” And he said, “No, Joseph wasn’t his dad. His mom was pregnant but Joseph wasn’t the dad...What do you think he grew up with?” And I thought about it, and as I thought about it, the light became alive to me and I went back into the Bible with a whole nother perspective. – Bill Roberts

Bill’s narrative is a fitting place to begin describing the content of this study. In the approximately seven minutes that it took Bill Roberts to recount how he opened up to what would eventually become his new way of life, he rather eloquently hit on several key themes that have surfaced throughout the testimony of other felons, chaplains and faith ministry personnel.

For example, Bill’s story takes us through the fear and desperation of 23-hour lockdown, being clean and alone with his thoughts for the first time in a long time, and facing a dauntingly long sentence. This desperation and solitude prompted Bill to turn to church initially for what many participants and certain analysts would call the “wrong” reasons – to get out of his cell and to improve his sentence. For desperation to precede spiritual searching is an expected finding, according to much of what is written in the sociology of religion, which therefore points us to that theory (Marx and Engels 1964; Berger 1967; Stark and Glock 1968; O'Dea and Aviad 1983; Rambo 1993; Johnstone 1997; Stark and Finke 2000).

Attending services because of a desire to get out of one’s cell, like Bill did, is peculiar to the prisoner’s experience. As we read Bill’s story, we see that once his depression
led him to hopelessness and suicidal thoughts, Bill’s motivation for Bible study participation changed. Later, we will read other testimonies that demonstrate the sometimes subtle changes in a prisoner’s motivation for religious involvement, which may or may not coincide with changes in participation. A prisoner’s true motive for attending services takes a critical position in this analysis, as it becomes apparent that inmates’ motives are scrutinized by chaplains, fellow inmates, prison personnel, and social scientists alike. For theoretical insight on this, we look to what has been written about backsliding in faith and in crime desistence (James 1982; Maruna 2001).

Another subject that Bill’s account introduces is the idea that someone would be escorted by another into the faith. For Bill, the chaplain played this pivotal role. For other participants, fellow inmates, religious volunteers, or their own chaplains occupy that role, but nearly all of the participants name someone who helped them to find faith. The social aspects of an apparently spiritual search come up both in the literature (Rambo 1993), and in the testimonies of chaplains and ex-felons alike, and comprise another important aspect of this analysis.

When Bill looked closely at a few chapters of the Bible, under the advice of the Chaplain, he found himself relating to specific characters or events in the faith, and, as he said, the Book became “alive” to him. Having something to relate to in the faith is another theme common to many of the testimonies included in this study. This moves us to consider some of the literature which suggests that new converts will be
drawn to a faith that represents their own struggle, particularly if they are in an oppressed category (Raboteau 1984; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Wilmore 1998).

The excerpt from my interview with Bill is just the beginning of Bill’s tale. But in this brief piece we hear a story that will be echoed by many of the people we meet in this study, and we see how the data are intended to drive the analysis, with theory following to lend structure and order to the rich stories like Bill’s. The focus here is on themes and issues that emerge from these stories – themes that are embedded in highly individual biography and often correspond to sociological knowledge that precedes this study.

Research Methods

For this research, data were collected through the following methods: 1) Observations of religious meetings and ceremonies in a number of prisons, 2) Interviews with prison chaplains, clergy and volunteers who minister to prison and re-entering populations, and 3) Interviews with consenting ex-felons who embraced faith themselves while they were in prison.

Andrew Skotnicki writes:

Inmate culture, and specifically inmate religious culture, is a symbolic world with its own constitutive rules. These rules can only be understood when one has trimmed one’s analytical expectations, and considered the possibility that the language of faith is a precondition for understanding the experience of faith. It is a precondition for determining the meaning of its rituals, its behavioral expectations, and what possibilities and sanctions emerge with the failure to live according to those expectations. (Skotnicki 2002:211-212)

7 In the end, Skotnicki’s essay warns any researcher of publishing any conclusions without having immersed herself in the setting to a far greater degree than I did. But his words of wisdom, that “To
The study considers both men and women and focuses on the three chief religious groups in the American penal institution: Non-denominational Christians, Roman Catholics, and Muslims. Glaser and Strauss, in discussing how integrated theory develops out of field work, note that,

"Using comparison groups maximizes the credibility of theory in two fundamental ways. First, by detailing precisely the many similarities and differences of the various comparison groups, the researcher knows, better than if he had studied only one or a few groups, under what sets of structured conditions his hypotheses are minimized and maximized; and hence to what kinds of social structures his theory is applicable...[Second, multiple comparison groups help] the researcher to calculate where a given order of events or incidents is most likely to occur or not occur..." (Glaser and Strauss 1969: 290)

The comparison groups in this study are both across gender and across faith affiliation. Differences and similarities emerge among the three faith groups, as well as between men’s and women’s experiences in each of the three faith groups, allowing for the kind of analysis that Glaser and Strauss believe can become theory (Glaser and Strauss 1969).

The first order in the task of understanding “inmate religious culture” and its “constitutive rules” was to acquire some knowledge of the religious tenets of each group, and, of course, to purchase a Holy Bible and a Holy Qur’an, which I did. But, as mentioned above, permission from the California Department of Corrections for my hours and hours of participant observation was not forthcoming. As a result, the speak for another is a task fraught with certain pitfalls,” helps underscore the responsibility that representing these data entails.
amount of research actually conducted behind prison gates was limited to about 24 hours observing religious meetings at two California prisons, one male and one female. In all cases I was invited by the prison chaplains to watch the services and mingle with the participants. I was very grateful for these opportunities and feel they added significantly to my understanding of the data I collected in interviews.

The names of all participants have been changed, and the two prisons will hereafter be referred to as California Vocational Prison (CVP) and Federal Women’s Facility (FWF).

I made contact with the 13 religious workers whom I interviewed, both clergy and lay people who minister to prisoners in California, through a snowball method. I visited the Archdiocese of San Francisco for a Catholic contact who, in turn, introduced me to other contacts who introduced me to others still (see Appendix 1 for a diagram of contacts and how referrals were made). I visited the Prison Fellowship Ministries office of Northern California for a referral to some Non-denominational Christian contacts, which led me to a prison warden and several prison chaplains, including the Muslim Imam of a local prison. I approached a second prison Imam at a community meeting on prison policy, who introduced me to additional informants. Each interview was preceded by an informed consent procedure, and each was tape-recorded. In the end, I interviewed seven Roman Catholic workers, three Non-denominational Christians and three Muslims (see Table 1).
Whenever possible, religious workers connected me to former inmates who would be interested in being interviewed. Those former inmates often introduced me to others, for a total of 18 ex-felons interviewed (two Catholics, ten Non-denominational Christians and six Muslims – see Table 2; also see Appendix 2 for descriptions of each participating ex-felon). Just under 80% of the sample of ex-felons was male, despite efforts to over-sample female ex-felons. Interviews were, again, always preceded by informed consent procedures and assurances of confidentiality, and all were tape-recorded.
### Table 2: Ex-Felons Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David Ringer</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick McDonnell</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shane Johnston</td>
<td>Assemblies of God</td>
<td>Af. Am.</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey Curtis</td>
<td>Non-denominational Christian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Roberts</td>
<td>Non-denominational Christian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Tucker</td>
<td>Non-denominational Christian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerome Ingles</td>
<td>Non-denominational Christian</td>
<td>Af. Am.</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose Arboles</td>
<td>Non-denominational Christian</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernando Vega</td>
<td>Non-denominational Christian</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy Iglesias</td>
<td>Non-denominational Christian</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra Pacheco</td>
<td>Non-denominational Christian</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meredith Buchanan</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ja'far Saadiq</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Af. Am.</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali Hassan</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Af. Am.</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachid Abdullah</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Af. Am.</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdul Haddad</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Af. Am.</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khadijah Perkins</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Af. Am.</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jameelah Haddad</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Af. Am.</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** See Appendix 2 for individual narrative profiles of each of the former inmate participants.

With the exceptions of Fernando Vega, a Non-denominational Christian whom I met at a Catholic service in prison but interviewed after his release, and Tommy Iglesias, who was referred to me by a friend, all of the former inmates I interviewed were expressly recommended by active members of the faith. About half were referred directly by religious workers who minister to prisoners. This is noteworthy because in this case the method for gathering the sample was also a method for gathering data. This sample is in no way representative of the inmates who leave prison having converted to faith while inside. To the contrary, this sample is almost exclusively comprised of the most “successful” former inmates, those who found faith in prison and whom leaders of that faith felt able recommend for a research project on a topic close to their own hearts. Where there were conspicuously few referrals (for
example, among Roman Catholics and among women in general), this was considered to be useful information for the analysis.
Chapter II: Finding Religion in Prison

Separation from society...inflicts unbearable psychological tensions upon the individual, tensions that are grounded in the root anthropological fact of sociality. The ultimate danger of such separation, however, is the danger of meaninglessness. (Berger 1967:23)

While past studies have been interested in inmates who participate in religious programs, they have largely been quantitative and have therefore focused more on the question of how many participate, rather than how and why they participate. These studies have also neglected to draw upon the rich body of theory on religious conversion and re-affiliation that exists in sociology. In this chapter we will address the research question, How and why do prisoners become involved in religious programs inside the prison, by considering 1) the rather abundant presence of religious groups in the prison, 2) the initial contact that prisoners have with these groups, and 3) the specific elements of the prison environment that may be conducive to adopting a faith and committing to it in prison. As we do this, we will note that there are significant ways that our participant data substantiate theories reviewed in the previous chapter.

Distribution of Religious Groups

They say religion and politics are the two topics to be avoided in polite dinner conversation. Perhaps this is why religious affiliation is not collected by the US Census Bureau, or by state prison systems. Whatever the reason, consistent and reliable measures of religious identification and religious participation are few and far between. In order to speculate some more on the specific phenomenon of finding
faith while incarcerated, we have compiled information from the Pew Research Council, the Gallup Poll Organization, City University of New York, the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and previously published research to make some cursory comparisons on religious affiliation and religious participation among men and women in and out of the prison system.

Religious Affiliation in the General Population and in Prison

Precise figures for the number of Muslims in America, in and out of prison, are particularly hard to come by. A Pew Research Council report from 2002 states that 1% of the US population is Muslim (Kohut and Rogers 2002). Presuming that the 1% estimate still applies, that would put the Muslim population at about 2.9 million today. This figure concurs with an estimate made by City University of New York’s American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) that estimated 2.2 million adult Muslims in America in 2001, and adding estimated children, just under 3 million (Kosmin and Mayer 2001). According to the ARIS report, between 27%-30% of the Muslims in the US are African American, comprising about 2% of the African American population. Bagby and colleagues counted approximately 19,000 new Muslim converts a year in the US, 74% of whom are African American, and 66% of whom are men (Bagby, Mamiya et al. 2001). A US State Department brochure called “Varieties of Worship” offers similar numbers, putting 30% of US Muslims as converts, and 30% of US Muslims as African Americans (Department of State 2004).

As for Muslims in prison, the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ 1997 figure shows Islam as the most popular non-Christian faith among federal prisoners. Including both
adherents of Orthodox Islam and Nation of Islam, it says that 7.6% of the federal prison population identify as Muslim. This appears to be seven times the proportion of Muslims in the general population of the US. Felicia Dix-Richardson quotes the Chaplain Administrator of the Federal Bureau of Prisons as saying in 1995 that approximately 6.1% of the federal prison population was Muslim (Dix-Richardson 2002). She reports that by 2001, the percentage of federal prisoners who were Muslim had gone up to 7.8%. With the Federal prison population at 136,359, (Bureau of Justice Statistics September of 2001) that was over 10,300 Muslims in the federal prisons (Dix-Richardson 2002).

We have no accurate records of the religious affiliation of the majority of prisoners in the US, since religious affiliation is not officially and systematically tracked in state prisons, or if it is, it is not shared with the public. There are, therefore, few statements that can be made as to the proportionate representation of faith groups in our prisons in general. It is often heard, though, that Islam is the fastest growing religion in prison. Conventional sources as well as specifically Islamic news sources tout this piece of information (Mujahid 2001; Dannin 2002; Zahn 2002). According to an online Islamic news magazine, a full 30% of the African American prison population is Muslim (Mujahid 2001). Using the federal prisoner estimate of 7.6%, even presuming that all the Muslims in this figure are African American, still only calculates to 17% of African American federal prisoners being Muslim. While including state prisoners could hypothetically yield results closer to 30%, the accuracy of this figure is difficult to verify. It will have to suffice to say that the
proportion of Muslims in state and federal prison appears to be much higher than that proportion in the general population.

Islam’s popularity in prison notwithstanding, the majority of prisoners who attend religious services are going to Christian services. Islam may be the fastest growing, but Christianity is still far more predominant in American prisons. According to Federal Bureau of Prisons figures from 1997, 33% of Federal prisoners self-identify as some form of Protestant, with Roman Catholics taking a close second at 31%, for a total of 64% Christian. In the general population of the Untied States 82% identify as some form of Christian, with 58% Protestant, and about 24% reporting as Roman Catholic (Kohut and Rogers 2002). Without figures for state prisoners, we cannot say definitively that Catholics are overrepresented, but they appear to be in the federal system.

Religious Participation in the General Population and in Prison

O’Connor and Perreyclear cite a US Department of Justice figure from a 1991 survey that 35% of state prisoners participate in some sort of worship service. Their own finding was that 49% of their sample of male prisoners in South Carolina had participated at least once in some sort of faith-based service (O’Connor and Perreyclear 2002). The results from a 1997 US Department of Justice Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities put 47% of inmates having

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8 Here the term Protestant refers to all non-Catholic Christians, including Latter Day Saints and other groups that worship Jesus Christ and use the New Testament but may not strictly identify themselves as “Protestant.”

9 They included 12-step programs in their calculation, which are arguably very different from explicitly religious programs.
participated in an organized religious activity since admission to prison (Justice, Statistics et al. 2000). About 32% had participated in an actual religious study group. The percentage of prisoners who engaged in religious activity, including private prayer, on a weekly basis was even higher at 60%. Among these, 20% spent ten or more hours a week in religious activity.

Since O'Connor and Perreyclear's sample was all men, we have disaggregated the 1997 religious participation data by gender for comparison. Our finding is still similar to theirs with 44% of the male prisoners and 58% of women saying that they had participated in some religious program in prison. Unfortunately, we have no data on prisoners' religious affiliation that can be analyzed by gender. We do, however, have religious participation data from both the general population and the state and federal prison systems 1997 dataset.
Table 3: Religious Participation Comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Population 2002*</th>
<th>Church, chapel, synagogue in past 7 days</th>
<th>Participate in Bible study group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difference</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State and Federal Prisoners 1997</th>
<th>Engaged in religious activity more than 10 hours a week</th>
<th>Religious activity in the past 7 days</th>
<th>Participate in Bible study group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difference</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*General population data from Gallup (Wisenman 2002)

Table 3 shows both male and female responses to a 2002 Gallup poll on religion, as well as male and female prisoner responses to the 1997 Department of Justice Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities. The figures show 1) that inmates appear to be more involved in faith activities than do people in the general population, and 2) that women, both in and out of prison, appear to participate in religious activity more than men do.

That inmates would be more religious is unexpected if one supposes that criminal offenders are of a sort of moral constitution not generally associated with high levels of religiosity. In a phone interview with a California prison information officer, I asked, “Do a lot of the inmates participate in religious programs?” to which he responded emphatically, “Oh, you would be surprised!” He estimated 60% to be “actively involved in religious programs” (Field Notes 3-6-02). A listener whose perspective included some consideration of the extant theoretical work on conversion, namely the role that despair and separation plays in religious seeking, might not be entirely “surprised,” (although they might find 60% to be a high estimate, as this
research shows). Furthermore, with today’s absence of publicly funded secular programs that might provide counseling and comfort away from chapel-based programs, these high levels of faith participation in prison are, again, not surprising.

The figures in the far right column of Table 3 show that Bible study participation is much higher, for both men and women, in prison than in the general population. But the numbers in the middle column might be misleading, as the general population and prison measures are not parallel. In the Gallup poll, respondents were asked about church/chapel/synagogue attendance in the past 7 days, while in the Department of Justice 1997 survey, prisoners were asked about religious activities, “including private prayer,” in the past 7 days. The latter question could be expected to generate higher figures anywhere.

Table 3 also includes a gender breakdown, a traditional independent variable in the sociology of religion. Studies generally find that women (outside of prison) are more religious and more involved in their churches than are men (Thompson 1991; Miller and Hoffman 1995; Wisenman 2002). According to Lincoln and Mamiya, women attendees outnumber men by three to one in rural black churches, and five to one in urban churches (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990:103). The numbers in Table 3 do not contradict the expectation that women are more religious, with both free and imprisoned women reporting greater involvement in all measures but one. When asked to report on how many hours they spent in worship or other faith-centered activities, male and female prisoners’ responses showed no significant variation,
using ANOVA comparison of means tests. The average (mean) number of hours spent per week for the sample of over 18,000 was 6.44. For women, it was 6.52, and for men 6.41, a (statistically insignificant) difference of about five minutes a week.

Next, this analysis should logically consider the variation in participation among different religious groups, both in and out of prison. Unfortunately, none of the prison data that are available allow for an analysis of religious identification with level of participation. Nor do any current studies exist that track the level of religious participation according to religious group. But the prison chapel observations in this study provide some information on this question.

At CVP, a men’s state prison, where the mainline population is 2,088, 35 inmates attended Catholic mass, the majority of whom were Latino, as noted above. In the Protestant (Non-denominational Christian) Sunday service there was a diverse group of 32 inmates. At CVP’s Friday Muslim *ju’mah* service there were 15 men, of whom 13 were black, one was of Arab decent and one was Fijian. Proportionate to the mainline population of the prison, these number show that very few inmates at CVP practice their faith by attending weekly service. So, while the data from the 1997 Department of Justice survey of the state and federal systems show 56% of male

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10 CVP has both a mainline population of long-term prison inmates, and a short-term “RC” population of inmates who are temporarily going through CVP’s Reception Center, awaiting evaluation for long-term prison placement. RC inmates have extremely restricted movements and, in fact comprise about 2/3 of CVP’s current population. RC services are held separately from mainline services, and both because these inmates are more numerous and because they have fewer opportunities to leave their cells, RC services are better attended than mainline services. Protestant RC services have about 100-120 inmates, as many as the chapel can hold. Catholic RC services have about 50 inmates. And Muslim RC services have between 60 and 70.
prisoners engaging in religious activity weekly (including private prayer), and 44% having participated in some organized religious activity since admission, the percentage of inmates who actually attend service on any given Sunday or Friday is a different matter. The Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim chaplains all indicated that the attendance on the days I observed was typical, although the Catholic chaplain said that when a priest is not available she holds a communion service rather than a full mass and attendance is sometimes half what I observed. This is broken down in Table 4, which lays out the number of inmates from each faith group that would reside at CVP if the 1997 federal figures we have for religious identification were any indication.

Table 4: Expected Chapel Attendance Compared with Actual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Islam</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical # of</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inmate adherents</td>
<td>(7.6% x 2,088)</td>
<td>(31% x 2,088)</td>
<td>(33% x 2,088)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(federal % X CVP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mainline population)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual # of inmates</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attending CVP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>theoretical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adherents at</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So, for example, if we are to believe that 7.6% of the mainline population at CVP might be Muslim, then we would expect 159 or so practicing Muslims to be living there. In fact, only fifteen inmates attend services on a typical Friday - 9% of the 159 we would expect to see in theory. Even lower percentages are found in Catholic and Protestant services.
In brief, there appears to be a fair amount of religious participation in prison, although it is not as high in actuality as some of the statistics would lead us to believe. Certain religious groups are represented in greater proportion in prison than in the outside world. According to the figures presented above, Muslim inmates are overrepresented at a rate of seven times their proportion of the general population. Though it is difficult to document, many contend that Islam is the fastest growing faith in prison, albeit the third most prevalent after Roman Catholic and combined Protestant, implying that the overrepresentation results at least in part from prison conversions. Catholics appear to be slightly overrepresented in the prison population as well, although Catholic prison chaplains and prison volunteers do not say that there is a lot of in-prison conversion (which happens through a process referred to as RCIA), so the reason for the overrepresentation might be speculated as having more to do with the overrepresentation of Latinos in the prisons. Such conjecture cannot be confirmed or refuted at the present time because the data are unavailable. Finally, gender appears to be associated with religion in prison in the same way that it is in the general population, with women participating at higher levels. As the analysis of this study's data goes deeper, we will see how these conclusions are both supported and contradicted by our findings. Before that, however, we will discuss the ways that prisoners come into contact with these faith groups, and the legal issues that have surrounded access.
Contact

In this section we discuss the strong presence of religion in prison and how prisoners first encounter that presence. It seems expected that religion be commonplace in prison for certain historical reasons listed above and certain legal reasons listed below. But the expectation also comes from the theoretical position that individuals search for a greater meaning in times of crisis and abject isolation. Later in this section we will hear the voices of prison clergy, volunteers and former inmates as they convey the degree to which this theoretical position bears out.

Legal Protections for Religion in Prison

The apparent naturalness of religion in the setting of the prison derives in large part from the historical religious design of the penal system (as discussed earlier), but also has to do with court and legislative protections enacted toward the end of the 20th Century. It should be noted that with these protections in place, clergy and religious volunteers have greater access to prisoners than do secular workers who address some of the same individual needs and concerns (e.g., counseling, support groups, substance abuse treatment), and that, of course, while secular services must be paid for, faith-based services tend to be free. Because of these associated costs, and a politically intolerant climate, secular programs have dwindled down to negligible levels, while faith programs have not. All of these factors combine to create a prison climate where a variety of religious advocates and programs flourish.

This has not always been the case, however. While there has been consistent Christian influence in the American penitentiary, less mainstream faith groups have
had to fight to get behind the locked gates. Beginning in the 1960s, Black Muslims, then the Nation of Islam, brought several lawsuits against prison administrations and state authorities to establish the right to practice their faith in the same way that other groups had been allowed. The Muslim plaintiffs won victories in a number of cases, bringing them access to Muslim ministers and halal food, and protecting them from systematic persecution by guards. The first inmate whose case for religious rights reached the US Supreme Court, however, was a Buddhist who was not being afforded the same right to his faith as were members of the more conventional Western faiths.

In [Cruz v. Beto], a Buddhist inmate was forbidden from worshipping in the prison chapel and from speaking to his religious advisor. When he shared his religious materials with other inmates, prison officials locked him in solitary confinement for two weeks on a diet of only bread and water. While the prison provided Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant chaplains, services, classes, and texts, it provided nothing for Buddhist worshippers. Moreover, prisoners who attended religious services were rewarded with "points of good merit" which increased "a prisoner's eligibility for desirable job assignments and early parole consideration." (Solove 1996 10)

Buddhism posed less of a threat to prison administrators than did the Nation of Islam, which was seen by many as a radical political movement rather than as a religion (Jacobs 1977; Gardell 1996; Magida 1996; Collins and Bailey 1998). Despite its presumably innocuous influence, Buddhism was not being permitted in this prison until the highest court in the country mandated that it be.

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12 See Cruz v. Beto (US Supreme Court 1972)
But the question of a prison’s authority to deny a prisoner’s right to practice his or her faith was not put to rest by the Cruz v. Beto decision. Cases continued to come before lower-level courts with unpredictable outcomes, not only by Muslims and Buddhists, but by Native American inmates as well. Some courts have demonstrated extreme reluctance to impose restrictions on the expertise of prison officials, while others have interpreted Constitutional guarantees to religious freedom more strictly. In response to the inconsistent rulings, in 1993 Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), designed to raise the level of justification to “compelling” in order for a prison official to deny an inmate the right to practice (Solove 1996).

According to an article from the Yale Law Journal in 1996, however, these intentions had not been met in practice:

> Despite RFRA’s apparent drastic change in the degree of protection for prisoners' religious rights cases, RFRA’s stated level of scrutiny is not the controlling factor in the way many courts are deciding prisoners' free exercise cases...Congress, in crafting RFRA, failed to recognize the power of these tendencies to affect the outcome of the balance. By neglecting to eliminate them, RFRA has not established a uniform heightened protection of religion in prisons. (Solove 1996:1)

Then, in 1997, RFRA was overturned by the US Supreme Court, leaving prisoners once again vulnerable to the caprice of prison officials. And according to the data in this study, prisons in California appear not to provide uniform and consistent protection for inmates’ religious practice, irrespective of religious preference.

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14 City of Boerne v. Flores, 521 U.S. 507 (1997)
The lack of legal protection notwithstanding, currently most California prisons are visited regularly by Wicca practitioners, accommodate Native American sweat lodges, and employ full-time, state-salaried Muslim chaplains. There is also a growing interest in Buddhism in prisons. As a faith practice that consists largely of solitary meditation and study, Buddhism suits the restrictions of prison. Formal Buddhism is joined by related meditative practices such as Vipassana, a ten-day meditation course being conducted in prisons on both coasts, Centering Prayer, a Buddhist-influenced Catholic meditation practice, and Yoga. The increasing diversity of faith groups in US prisons undoubtedly speaks to the progress that prisoners' legal battles have brought. Furthermore, when I interviewed the Director of Prisoner Services, he was adamant that California Vocational Prison takes RFRA very seriously, promising every inmate access to his spiritual leader after only a basic check into the faith group's legitimacy (Field Notes 3/12/03), indicating that RFRA's impact may go beyond its legal status. Six years after being overturned, the defunct legislation appears to still touch the attitudes of some prison administrators.

Notably, secular programming does not enjoy the same sort of protections that have been fought for over the past few decades. During the past thirty years, we have watched publicly-funded prison education, psychological services, and support groups become extinct, making way for a more punitive orientation to prison confinement. And while the past three decades have been full of ground-breaking legal battles over religious freedom in prison, secular therapeutic programs have not been defended in the courts in the same way. Moreover, prison administrators have
demonstrated no sense that they must ensure a prisoner’s *right* to access secular professionals, support groups or therapeutic materials. This, again, has created a climate in the prisons characterized by the availability of faith-based support services and the inaccessibility of secular alternatives. At CVP, for example, if an inmate wants to take a parenting class or attend a support group for nurturing relationships with family members on the outside, he can go to the Christian chapel, or nowhere at all. This is surely one of the factors that contributes to the appeal of faith participation for inmates (especially in California, where secular prison programs have been officially abandoned), but it is not the only factor. The discussion now turns to the more personal motivations for faith involvement.

**Desperation**

So the prisoner in California has an array of spiritual choices when desperation hits. And, by the accounts of the participants in this study, desperation hits hard. We recall from Bill’s story in the Methods section that it was facing a long sentence that initially prompted him to look into faith. He is not alone in this – most of the ex-felons who were able to stick with their faith through release turned to faith just subsequent to being sentenced to the longest prison term they had ever faced, suggesting that the daunting prospect of a long prison sentence may be a factor in turning to religion. Further evidence of this comes from a 1997 survey of federal and state prisoners. The survey shows that about half of the inmates serving life sentences attended religious study programs, while less than a third of inmates serving lesser sentences attend such programs (Justice, Statistics et al. 2000).
Also on the topic of desperation and religious seeking, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James offers the account of a Mr. S.H. Hadley. James uses Mr. Hadley's testimony to illustrate James Leuba's contention that people seek religion to seek relief from a "sense of sin."

One Tuesday evening I sat in a saloon in Harlem, a homeless, friendless, dying drunkard. I had pawned or sold everything that would bring a drink. I could not sleep unless I was dead drunk. I had not eaten for days, and for four nights preceding I had suffered with delirium tremens, or the horrors, from midnight till morning. I had often said, 'I will never be a tramp. I will never be cornered, for when that time comes, if ever it comes, I will find a home in the bottom of the river.' But the Lord so ordered it that when that time did come I was not able to walk one quarter of the way to the river. As I sat there thinking, I seemed to feel some great and mighty presence. I did not know then that it was Jesus, the sinner's friend. (James 1982:202)

This testimony is from the 1890s, but resembles the testimony of our ex-felons, interviewed over a hundred years later, in that the speaker expresses a sense of misery and desperation. Mr. Hadley was not in prison, but was certainly at a low point in his own life – his low point was brought on by abject addiction, also a common theme among the felons in this study. Additionally, there is suicidal ideation directly preceding his openness to spiritual salvation, and a theme that will come later in this text is introduced here: God's direct intervention in this individual's intended course of action.

The experience of the prisoner who turns to religion is similar to Mr. Hadley's, according to this lay minister from the Catholic faith:

My experience is that most of them hit sobriety. It's difficult to maintain an alcohol or drug habit in jail or prison. Sobriety is a painful experience. Many of them are facing a long sentence and they don't know how to handle that because
the jail experience is shattering them, the threat level. They can’t imagine
themselves able to deal with. It’s pain. They’re looking for God to help them
through it. – Roy McLean, Lay Catholic Prison Ministry

Still discussing how people seek religion as relief from regret and misery associated
with “sin,” James cites his contemporary Edwin Starbuck who observed in his own
study of close to 200 Christian converts that, “In a majority of cases, indeed, the ‘sin’
almost exclusively engrosses the attention, so that conversion is, ‘a process of
struggling away from sin rather than of striving towards righteousness’” (James
1982:209 quoted from Starbuck 1900 p. 64). Like the Catholic lay minister above,
the Protestant Chaplain at CVP speaks of the difficulty that a prisoner faces as a
motivating factor for chapel attendance. He recognizes the “struggle away from sin”
rather than “toward righteousness,” as Starbuck calls it, but is dubious of such
motives.

In prison there is a sense of upheaval that presents a need for stability, so they
come to church...[I tell inmates,] “Don’t come in here because it’s safe, because
you have a habit of going to church, for the community aspect – come in for an
authentic experience with God.” When you come into prison, you’re scared. A
lot of them run to God out of a need for therapy, a sense of security, but not for a
relationship with God.” – Rev. Roger Ruskin

CVP’s Muslin chaplain says essentially the same thing.

One thing about coming to prison is it’s a shock. They are looking for something
to give them hope...that’s not the right reason to come to Islam...But sometimes it
takes bad things to make us more conscious...the right reason is a love for God. –
Imam Bilal

Whether it is expressly for an “authentic experience with God,” or simply to get out
of one’s cell, a good number of prisoners will attend services at some point in their
sentence. And almost everyone in this sample mentioned that psychological
difficulty prompted them to turn to faith. Jerome Ingles, an African American man who went to prison for robbery and came out a Non-denominational Protestant minister, says this about his depression in prison:

I had become very tired of who I was. I was gambling into debt, had lost a marriage, a daughter, any kind of relationship with my mother. The guy that I am today was never going to happen. And I was just tired of being tired. On my birthday that I was turning 33 years old, I just started crying. I was in a low state of what the future had in store for me. I was going to die in prison, my mom didn’t love me anymore. I started crying. In that crying the Holy Spirit spoke to me. There is a way out. The way out was to really understand all of the things I had been ignoring in Jesus. Jesus Christ, as the way the truth and the light...So, what I did that night is I cried, and I trusted, I was really far enough gone to try anything. So, I didn’t make this decision based on any intellectual, what-do-you-call-it – I didn’t make it based on anything I thought I was being wise about. I made it because I was tired. – Jerome Ingles

Shane Johnston, another African American who became a minister after his release from prison, recounts a similar feeling of emotional exhaustion in prison:

So I just started doing my time. But I kept getting miserable. I went to prison for my involvement in a murder-robbery. Didn’t kill the person, but I gave my cousin the knife, who did kill the person. And I used to wake up, for about a year and a half, I would wake up. I’d have these nightmares, profuse. I would wake up and I’d be sweating profusely...and sometimes I’d grab a razor and I’d think, you know, I’d just want to end it. I just couldn’t handle the screaming, the screaming in my head, this man was begging for his life. And I tried everything. I’d joke and I told people if I thought it would have helped I would have joined the White Aryans. Ijust didn’t want to come back to prison again. It took me 30 seconds, at best, when I walked into prison to realize that this was not a career move. I knew I wouldn’t come back. I don’t care what movie you’ve seen, I don’t care who you’ve talked to. None of us can describe it in words that can really – you have to imagine going to bed and waking in a place where you never know if you’re going to be the next one killed, if you’re going to be gang-raped, you don’t know nothing. You don’t know if the guards are going to leave your cell open...it’s a place filled with fear, and everybody in there, I don’t care who they are, is afraid of something and someone, but nobody shows it.

...One day I was so miserable, I had a guy on the outside who was delivering things to the prison, bringing drugs in every other week, so I had the best dope connection in the prison, in my limited perspective. But one day I just sat in the prison yard and just said, “you know what God, I’m so miserable. I don’t even
believe you exist. But if you do exist, I really need you to help me.” That was it. I got up and no stars, no bells, no nothing, but I knew, it was almost like that was the first time I had ever been honest with God, and I knew, something happened internally. And from that moment to this one, I’ve been a different man. – Shane Johnston

Of course, Shane Johnston did not join the White Aryans, nor did he “end it” with a razor. But contemplating suicide is already a familiar subject. We are all familiar with Durkheim’s study of suicide, and Stark and Bainbridge in 1996 found a statistically significant inverse relationship between church membership and suicide rates (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:11-30). This may provide a small hint into why both Bill Roberts and Mr. Hadley began to search for God during a suicidal period.

Below Nick McDonnell, a white man who converted to Catholicism in prison, makes a similar reference:

The situation went from very bad to a lot worse from the standpoint of at first it looked like I might get off with a misdemeanor charge and then it would look like at the worst I’d get some county jail time, but ultimately I was dealt a pretty severe prison sentence. Twelve years. So I did half time for that so I was in for over six...During that period of about 7 months I was what you would probably describe as clinically depressed. Suicidal. I became suicidal during the course of that whole process. And the loss of power and control of my life. And certainly I experienced a great need and want for some kind of comfort and love. I lost a lot of dear friends in this process. I was also supported by some, but the fact is I was separated physically from that love and had no real impression of an acceptable situation for my life, not only now because I’m in prison, in this horrible place, but in the future. Even if I were to endure the process and so forth, I could not imagine anything being acceptable based on what I had done and whom I had harmed and the devastation I had created. I didn’t see a way of living with that as a positive human being. As a result I was suicidal...I just felt trapped by the condition of life. And if you’re trapped by the condition of life, or you think that you are, then prayer became a very necessary avenue. I mean I was in a concrete 9X5 cage. The sum total of my life was the bars and the concrete floor, and the shame I was knowing and the pain I recognized that I had caused. It sounds like a platitude, but the old ‘one day at a time’ became one hour at a time and sometimes one minute at a time. ‘All right, God, are you going to get me through this minute? Because I’m not sure I can.’ It was in the spirit of that conversation that things began to happen very, very slowly and sweetly. A guy came, you
know there was very little literature around in these cells; we were locked down 23 hours a day. But [prison volunteers] would come around and of course, you’d just take it in because you had so much time for nothing. And so reading scripture, which I tried to do. And for the first time in my life I decided to look at the Bible and read some verses, and this time, because I knew I needed God, I was, when something came up that I couldn’t understand or relate to, I was going to do something different. And that was, instead of putting the book down, I would say ‘OK, God, I don’t get that one,’ and I’m just going to let it go and read on...There would be these times in my quaking broken heart that the scripture would sing a song of hope in the sweetest and tenderest of ways, to make me realize that here was something for me left. That I wasn’t the piece of shit that I thought I was. That’s how the seed began to grow. I don’t have a tale of Jesus at my bedside literally telling me to rise up. But I have this tale of a sweet and ever gentle reality that is a living Christ that is in love with me. – Nick McDonnell

Along with a clear sense of sorrow, Nick McDonnell’s account carries a profound sense of regret. Shane Johnston was haunted by nightmares and the sound of the murder victim’s screams while Nick very simply uses the word “shame” to describe what he was feeling. For Ja’far Saadiq, who also was called to the ministry after his prison term and is now a prominent Imam in Al-Islam (the indigenous orthodox Islamic movement in the United States, as distinguished from Nation of Islam), the words of the Qur’an articulate his regret.

And then I received a Muhammad Speaks newspaper form the Nation of Islam...In the insert was a verse from the holy Qur’an, verse 27 or 28. It said ‘Woe is me. Would that I had taken the way of the messenger.’ And that was all it said. And to me, that was a message for me from God, saying, ‘Had you followed the way of the messenger, you wouldn’t be in this trouble.’ And it was kind of like I was being given some direction. I took it as being given some direction, and also I took it as I was being punished for my negligence. Because I believed that Islam was a true way for a person to devote themselves to God. I believed that but I was too weak to follow up on my conviction so I felt I was being punished. – Ja’far Saadiq

If what Berger says is correct, that separation from society begets terrible fears of meaninglessness, and that such fears stimulate thoughts of a higher order (Berger
then being in solitary confinement, separated even from the other exiles, would probably prompt spiritual searching for many. Indeed, for several of the felons in this study, Administrative Segregation (Ad Seg), the Secured Housing Unity (SHU or the “shoe”), or “the hole” presents a pain for which only faith is palliative. Tommy Iglesias, a Non-denominational Christian, describes going to the hole:

In 1992, I went in for robbery, and when I hit the yard, the word was, “Hit that dude. He’s a drop-out and he ain’t no good. Take him off the yard because he’s a drop-out and he’s no good. He turned away from us in another pen. He knows too much about the things we used to do. He’s too familiar with the things we did, and now that he’s not serviceable anymore, we don’t need him.” In 92 I was no longer affiliated with [my old gang]…Through acquiring that jacket, they rushed me. And that’s where I got messed up pretty well. I got cut. I was unconscious, and when I woke up they were stitching my face together...I was in the hole...I had to make a decision, what kind of person I was going to do the rest of my time as. I said, “The only time I had felt any kind of relief or any kind of justification in myself or in my life was when I was free. When God was part of my life.” So I got a Bible and started reading it. I started becoming good at reading it. It was in the hole at San Quentin - I was in the hole 75 days. I started reading the Word of God and it started doing things for me. Doing things to me. It’s a trip. It’s a trip. – Tommy Iglesias

Absolute isolation, à la Cherry Hill, apparently gives individuals time to contemplate their existence, and to read the Bible. As Fernando Vega, who describes himself as a Christian and a “believer in God” rather than identifying with any particular denomination, says, there’s nothing else to do.

I learned all this [about God] while I was incarcerated. By reading. Mostly it was from being thrown in the hole, which is segregation from the other population. Like I learn all this because inside the cell there was nothing there except the Bible. Nothing to read except the Bible. So that in case you don’t go crazy or anything, you need to keep yourself alive, you need to keep yourself healthy, well [to keep from] going mentally crazy. You need to keep yourself sane. I read the Bible to keep myself sane. When I was reading the Bible I started to realize that maybe the Bible was the truth. I learned about miracles in the Bible that were hard to believe, but in my heart I accept them. There had to be a God. There had to be a person who created this universe. We’re not alone. – Fernando Vega
For Sandra Pacheco, also a Non-denominational Christian, it was only the fear and sobriety of solitary confinement that brought her to a place of surrender.

I kept going to Bible study. And I kept learning. And even though I didn’t know what I needed to know about the Lord yet, I was still learning. I was praying and I was still selling dope in jail, still running all kinds of drugs and being a criminal...My husband wrote me and said “You better stop.” He knew what I was doing. So they rolled me up, because they knew I was doing something. And they put me in Ad-Seg, 24-hour lockdown, even thought they couldn’t find anything on me, they knew, they knew they had something going on with me, so they could put me on 24-hour lock-down, I mean, 23-hour lock-down. I could only come out of my cell for 45 minutes a day for the last 4 months of jail. That was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. Because I actually got to sit down, be alone with myself and read my Bible. As I started to read it, and I started to pray, I just asked God, “I’m scared. I’ve never been clean. I’ve been using drugs since I was 11 years old, and I don’t know how to be drug-free. I don’t know how not to get loaded. – Sandra Pacheco

Psychologist Lewis Rambo might term the emotional state described by Sandra and the others a “crisis” that prompts a spiritual search (Rambo 1993:44-55). Lofland and Stark call it “enduring, acutely felt tensions” (Lofland and Stark 1965), and the 12-Step literature calls it “hitting bottom.” Explaining why religious movements arise, Bryan Wilson points to a number of social crises:

Change in the economic position of a particular group...disturbance of normal social relations...industrialization and urbanization; the failure of the social system to accommodate particular age, sex and status groups...Particular groups are rendered marginal by some process of social change...Insecurity, differential status anxiety, cultural neglect, prompt a need for readjustment. (Wilson 1967:31)\footnote{In the rational choice theory of religion, Stark and Finke (2000: 28-32) critique Wilson and use his explanation of secular influences as an example of the “old paradigm” which is biased toward the secular, to the exclusion of acknowledging the power of religion in religious conversion, commitment and movement. This notwithstanding, Stark and Finke make an argument that is not dissimilar to Wilson’s. By framing religious activity in terms of cost and benefit, they implicitly accept that secular and religious factors contribute to an individual’s “readjustment” in religious choice.}$^{15}$
While his discussion is not about the factors that contribute to individual choices in religion, but to the rise of religious movements, it could easily be applied to individuals. The disturbance in social relations, economic position and the extreme marginalization that accompany incarceration are evident. The assumption that these factors contribute to a search for guidance, meaning, community, and, therefore, religion, is common in the literature. As the interview excerpts above show, individuals who turn to religion in prison do indeed refer to motional discomfort, anxiety, despair or crisis.

*The Encounter*

The comments above make the power of solitude as a catalyst for religious awakening clear. Most people who convert, however, do not do so in solitude. Instead it is an individual or a community that escort them into the faith (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Phillips 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984; Machalek and Snow 1985). Lewis Rambo calls it the *encounter*, the first contact that the would-be religious convert has with an *advocate* of the faith (Rambo 1993:91-101).

In the prisons where study participants had been, some faith groups are represented by actively proselytizing volunteers. For other faith groups, it is more likely to be another inmate member of the group who casually opens an entry-way for the potential convert.

At the Northern California administrative center for Prison Fellowship Ministry (PFM), Billy Jensen, a top-level administrator for the region, told me that PFM had a
goal to reach 2005,000 prisoners by 2005 (Field Notes 5/28/02). PFM’s mission is to “partner with local churches across the country to minister to a group that society often scorns and neglects: prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families.” PFM employees and volunteers contact churches in the communities that surround jails and prisons and involve ministers and churchgoers at those churches in a widespread prison ministry. PFM trains the new volunteers, who can be from any Christian church, but tend to be Protestant rather than Catholic. PFM is not the only national Christian prison ministry organization that operates this way; Bill Glass Ministries are also pervasive, and individual churches often have their own unaffiliated prison ministry programs. These programs generally work through the Protestant Chaplain to organize Bible study and other volunteer ministry activities, such as counseling, Christian 12-step, and family skills programs (Field Notes 5/28/02, 3/23/03). All of these efforts, including the regular Sunday services provided by the Protestant prison chaplain, are dubbed “Non-denominational Christian,” regardless of the specific denomination of the religious volunteer or minister. Consequently, many of the prison converts also call themselves Non-denominational Christians.

PFM’s ambitious goal speaks to the evangelical spirit among the Christians in prison. Further evidence of this enthusiasm for spreading the Word could be seen in the response from one Bible study participant at CVP when asked why he was attending. This young, white inmate said that he was there to learn the Bible so that he could “take it back out to the yard and evangelize.” His comment was met with a couple of nods from the other inmate participants (Field Notes 3/23/03). And, on a related note,
every one of the Christian (not Catholic) ex-felons that I interviewed asked me about my relationship with God, and if Jesus was my personal savior.  

By contrast, in Al-Islam, the form of Islam practiced by most non-immigrant American Muslims, the *da'wah* is the means by which potential converts are exposed to the faith. *Da’wah* simply means teaching and differs vastly from evangelical Christian methods of proselytizing. While there is some variation within the wide range of what is Islam, generally *da’wah* is not an aggressive proselytization, but an active process of educating people of what Muslims feel is the truth. Missionary activity is limited by the Qu’ranic admonition, “There is no compulsion in religion” (Sura 2:256). Larry Poston’s book, *Islamic Da’wah in the West* offers examples of both very passive approaches to *da’wah*, such as Robert Crane (from the International Institute of Islamic Thought) who says that, “Good Muslims do not even think of conversion...because the task of Muslims [is] to implement the will of Allah in the world. We can never know what the will of Allah is for any individual human being...the concept of conversion is associated with the belief that one has a monopoly of truth, whereas the Qur’ān repeatedly emphasizes that only on the Last Day will anybody know what truth is” (Poston 1992:5), and more assertive approaches, exemplified in the writing of Muhammad Khurshid who has lectured that

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16 I generally tried to deflect this line of discussion whenever an interviewee brought it up. I would tell them that I was Catholic, which usually satisfied them. The fact that I have not been a practicing Catholic in about 20 years made this answer slightly mendacious, but after interviewing Jeffrey Curtis, I was assured that this one lie would preserve the integrity of my interview. I had just told Jeffrey Curtis that I was Catholic, and he said, “Catholic is Christian. You’re a Christian, then – 'cause if you weren’t I was going to have to evangelize you!” and smiled.
a Muslim’s “sole aim is to convince any and every person of the truth” (Poston 1992:126).

In my impression, the Muslims in this study subscribed to the da’wah described by Crane. While it was probably clear to them that I was not Muslim myself (except in the prison services when I covered my head out of respect), none of the Muslims I interviewed inquired about my own spiritual beliefs. This stood out in contrast to the Christian interviewees who all asked. The Imams and Muslim volunteers very much de-emphasized proselytization as they discussed the purpose of their work. Imam Mahmoud, the Muslim Chaplain at FWF says the following:

We don’t have to go around to try to make people Muslims. I just said to an inmate, “I’m not going to tell you [that] you should be a Muslim.” You have to respect everyone’s search for their creator. – Imam Mahmoud

Maryam Sabree, a Muslim lay person who volunteers in prisons all over California, concurs with this sentiment:

...[I]n Islam it’s no compulsion in religion. You can’t make anybody practice or do the way you want them to do. – Maryam Sabree

Rachid Abdullah, who became a Muslim after going to prison for selling drugs, also feels that it is not through proselytization, but through the truth of the Qur’an itself that Islam has grown.

The Born Again Christian, they have a heck of an outreach procedure. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, they pass out paper. In Islam, people just find the way, and it’s the fastest growing religion in the world. People gravitate to it because their souls call them to it. People just show up at the mosque, white people included. That’s what makes Islam such a threat to Western society, because Western society is segregated as hell on just anything you can think of. There’s no segregation in Islam. There are people from every race. All the cultures around
the world that people bring to Islam – Islam is the common language. People want to purify their hearts, they go to Islam. If you ever hear anyone say that someone enlisted them, don’t believe it. – Rachid Abdullah

Most of the Muslims in this study who found Islam in prison said that they simply picked up a newspaper in the prison, or a Qur’an. Very few spoke of being ushered into the faith by an “advocate.” In one of the few Muslim accounts of an encounter with an advocate, Khadijah Perkins talks about how she obtained her first Qur’an:

Directly after I went to prison I was trying to find a better way of life and I would pray and ask God to direct me. During a physical…at the medical ward in the prison, I was able to see a Qur’an in the doctor’s office. And he shared it with me. So I took it back to my housing unit and just started reading it. And from reading it I felt a very strong connection to changing my religious belief and I felt Islam could help me…so I asked this doctor when I returned the Qur’an, how could I become a Muslim? And I became a Muslim that day…and I’ve never regretted it. – Khadijah Perkins

Khadijah never saw or spoke to the physician again. When I asked her if he had provided spiritual guidance she said “no,” that no one in particular had.

The fact that it was a physician and not an imam who introduced Khadijah to the Qur’an is less unusual than one might imagine. While there is some logic in assuming that prison chaplains and volunteer clergy would have the greatest influence on prisoners’ spiritual practices, particularly in the adoption of new faith, Stark and Finke suggest that “laity are often more persuasive than ecclesiastics…[because] they are perceived as having little or no vested interest…”(Stark and Finke 2000:111). As Dan Tucker, a participant who was born again in prison, puts it, “Outside community members were our real mentors.” Elaine Murray, a Catholic layperson who ministers to the incarcerated, feels that in the Catholic church, prison ministry is really a lay
ministry. This is due to a shortage of priests, or a shortage of priests who are called to prison ministry. She feels, however, that, “prisoners need presence, more than they need communion or the sacraments, or even mass,” so the lack is not something that troubles her.

In this study, when asked, “Was there a certain person or people who helped you to get involved in the faith?,” four out of eighteen of the ex-felons responded that it was the prison chaplain. For the others it was most likely another inmate (7 responses), or a volunteer from the outside (3 responses). Three participants said it was no one in particular, and, as noted, Khadijah said it was the physician.

The powerful role that other inmates can play in prison conversions comes through in this statement by Jerome Ingles:

One night, after observing the Christmas service, I was on the yard and I started talking with some of the Christians that I had met and I started building relationships with them. They were kind and nice and their relationship to me began to affect me. Little by little I started breaking down. There was this one guy Julio, who I could squash with one hand, [he] was a really nice guy, kind, and yet bold enough to let me know that my life was going nowhere. For him to have the guts to talk to me like that, where did he get that from? I thought I knew Christianity, just believing in God. This guy lived it. I started learning what living it meant. – Jerome Ingles

Meredith Buchanan describes her spiritual awakening below, and how a fellow inmate introduced her to the Non-denominational Christian retreat that inspired it.

This inmate had, in turn, been introduced to the retreat by other inmates:

While I was incarcerated I really looked into my spirituality and I found that my link to Christianity was stronger than any other. I started exploring, and you have a great opportunity when you’re incarcerated to explore religious groups. You
know, they all come in with their representatives. So you know, I went. I checked out the Lutherans, Catholics, and the this and the that. I also went to some Buddhist meditation classes, yoga classes, you know I did a lot of different things while I was there...I just checked it all out. I started reading the Bible. I read the Bible for the first time in my life, which was great. And learned a lot. A little influenced by the different groups, you know, their studies and stuff. I even went to the Jehovah's Witness group for a little while just to check it out although I knew it wasn't for me. But, um, I was walking the yard with a friend who said she was going to go to...Kairos. I said, "What's Kairos?" And she said "It's this Non-denominational Christian retreat that they do here in the prisons. And my friends went last year and they liked it, so I'm going to go this year." I said "Oh, can I come?" And she said, "Sure." So I went to this Altreas, and, you know, people were singing Christian songs and friendly and sweet and everything and it looked kind of interesting. So I signed up to go to this Kairos retreat. And when I did I had a spiritual awakening. I went to these talks that the people gave and one of the women...gave a talk and she was talking about childhood abuse and being, feeling less than spouses, and being a part of a group but never feeling to be the dominant one or assertive. You know, her dad did weird things to her...And I just totally identified with her. Up until that point...I thought these people are nice; it's so nice of them to come and do this nice thing for us. But when I listened to her talk, I realized that I wasn't any different than her. The difference was that I had gotten arrested for the things that I'd done, and she hadn't. She was doing a lot of similar things that I'd done only she happened to have a spiritual awakening before she went to jail. And it changed the way I looked at things. From that point on, it just gave me an opportunity to view myself as someone who could do something different from what I had always done. And I started rigorously working towards doing something different. – Meredith Buchanan

According to Stark and Finke, “People take their cues from the example set for them by typical others. To the extent that most people around them display high levels of commitment and express their confidence that their religion is true and effective, people will conform” (Stark and Finke 2000:147). The example, then, that other religious inmates provide for the recently inducted would be expected to have some impact on religious commitment. For Jameelah Haddad, the example of “typical others” was very influential.

[My involvement began by] just being around a lot a lot of Muslims and just seeing the way that they lived, and just seeing the structure. – Jameelah Haddad
Tommy Iglesias, a Non-denominational Christian, says he found strength and inspiration watching his Christian peers in prison.

Brother Jackson, he’s a lifer – I met him in prison [during my second sentence]. My first sentence I was still too young in the faith. I was still not putting my faith in God. I didn’t have support, because I was raised in a family that was criminal. Even now, they still got that little criminal thing...if they can get around society, they still partake in that...Being in prison, I was inspired by so many men in there – most of them were lifers. Their lives were taken away from them, but they found their peace. I used to marvel because...I’d see them smiling and looking at me and talking about Christ an I’d be like, “Whoa, how can this dude – how can he be smiling and telling about how God is good, when he’s doing a life sentence?” How can you get the news [that you won’t get paroled] and then say that’s God’s will? I couldn’t understand that. Maybe miss a week from church the next week be able to preach a message and touch hearts that day?...Through their trying, I found strength. Whatever I’m going through ain’t nothing in comparison with what they’re going through. – Tommy Iglesias

Jerome Ingles was similarly moved by the Christians around him. Below he tells of how an inspirational fellow inmate led him to reevaluate his principles.

[There were] the unnamed brothers who lived the Christian life in front of me [who were influential]. For instance, there was a guy whose name I don’t remember anymore. He was in line where you get your grocery from [in the prison]...The lady told him he had six dollars left. He said no he didn’t. I recognized him as having been one of those Christian guys. So she looked again and discovered that he was right, “you don’t have six dollars left, thank you very much.” Well I thought that was the most ridiculous thing in the world to do. I thought the most idiotic thing, I just laughed, I was in my house laughing. Then something in my conscience, which the Christian experience refers to as the Holy Spirit, asked me a question that I couldn’t answer: Could you have done that? Could you have done that? Just the fact that I had to answer no, let me know that I wasn’t the one in control – that I was the one who was really being pimped, for lack of a better term, by the devil. I was under the bondage of doing the wrong thing. There was no way I even had the choice to do the right thing...It wasn’t even in my power, because there’s no way in the world I could have given that six dollars back...But I learned that day that I want to have the choice to steal it or not steal it. I want to have the choice to tell a lie or not tell a lie. I want to be the one that’s in charge of that, but I wasn’t. I was controlled by my desires, controlled by my wants, controlled by my ego... I wanted to be able to say no, I’m able to be humbled. – Jerome Ingles
In prison, many find themselves at a new emotional low. With some legal protections and a certain changing sensibility, the diversity of faith groups present in the California prisons is unprecedented. As Meredith Buchanan says, there is a “great opportunity when you’re incarcerated to explore religious groups,” since “they all come in with their representatives.” And some prisoners do seek out comfort from the emotional anguish through these spiritual groups. There is usually a peer or a spiritual leader who helps guide the prisoner in this direction, although Muslims who convert in prison emphasize the influence of the literature alone. Regardless, the example set by other inmates who are members of the faith groups appears to be powerful among those who finally do decide to adopt the new faith.

Prison Culture and the Pursuit of Faith

Many prisoners may initially go to prison chapel in response to despair, led there by someone they meet in prison. Our sample, though, is comprised of people who not only went to chapel while they were in prison, but for whom faith became central in their lives. There were things the faith offered that kept them coming back, Sunday after Sunday (or Friday after Friday), even after release. Participants describe some of these factors in their testimonies about their spiritual paths. Their references to the appeal of faith correspond to the specific circumstances of living in a punitive environment, coming to terms with a criminal history, and the life stories that led to that history in the first place.
This 'self-evident' character of the prison, which we find so difficult to abandon, is based first of all on the simple form of 'deprivation of liberty'. How could prison not be the penalty *par excellence* in a society in which liberty is a good that belongs to all in the same way and to which each individual is attached, as Duport put it, by a 'universal and constant' feeling? (Foucault 1979:232)

Foucault observes that in a society that embraces *freedom* above all else, the system for punishment quite logically involves denying the punished of his her freedom. Freedom, then, would be the first apparent commodity that might have great value but be unattainable.

Even before the data from interviews illustrates this point, some of the religious program literature from the prison ministries use the powerful symbol of the word *free*. There is a Christian prison ministry called, “Free Inside,” that operates, again, as a Non-denominational prison outreach organization. The Catholic prayer booklet that provides instructions for Centering Prayer (a relatively recent meditative movement in the Roman Catholic faith) is entitled *Locked Up and Free*. And one of the Non-denominational Christian programs at CVP, run by the Protestant chaplain, is called FREE, Family Relationship Education and Enrichment.

That same Protestant chaplain was giving a sermon at CVP and said the following: “God tells us we are to know the Word, have faith in the Word. The next step is to behave the scripture that we believe. This is where we are growing...Faith becomes our lifestyle. When you walk in, the word walks in...Because of selfishness, we will use the word to manipulate folks, to get money, to judge others.” He said that was
not what the Word was about, but that the Word was truth. Then he began, “The truth will make you,” and the assembled inmates completed the phrase, bellowing in unison, “Free!” To which the reverend replied, “No more bondage!” (Field Notes 3/23/03)

But freedom is not only a symbolic trope used by religious workers in the prison, it is a part of the vocabulary of the ex-felons who participated in the study. Many specifically use the word to describe what faith involvement has brought them. Here Jeffrey Curtis and Tommy Iglesias, both Christians, each proclaim the freedom they felt in prison.

I learned to walk as a free man in prison... They just cannot conceive of the idea of being free inside of prison. That the freedom isn’t the fence around you, the freedom is in here [points to his heart]. And that just changes your whole attitude. And that just gnaws at some people...they can’t understand it. – Jeffrey Curtis

Most of the time they know when you’re just hiding behind the Bible, I wasn’t just hiding, I was finding my freedom in there. I was free. I did three years and 11 months in there and for 3 years and 7 months of that I was free. That’s the freest I’ve ever been in my life. In the pen! Can you believe that?... Men are being set free. They’re doing their time but they’re not doing time. – Tommy Iglesias

Faith freed Jerome Ingles from his perception that he was even in prison, allowing him to spend the last ten years of his sentence free.

Once you truly adopted it, it became simple. I wasn’t even in prison. – Jerome Ingles

Rachid Abdullah also talks about freedom as he describes Islam:

[The best thing about Islam is] Freedom. It means freedom from all the things that I worshiped before I had Islam: personality, materials. See in Islam, there is no hierarchy, there’s only God and there are human beings, and none of us [human beings] are any different. – Rachid Abdullah

94
Imam Mahmoud, who himself converted to Islam after identifying at various times in his life as Catholic, Marxist and Atheist, describes why he provides spiritual guidance to prisoners:

God brought me here...I was so far away from what I am now. I had no clue; I had no idea that this is where I would be. What Islam has taught me is that you have to have a tremendous love of people, of human beings. And that's one of the reasons I go in prisons...I've met some people in prison that are actually more free in their thinking and their behavior than...so called free people. – Imam Mahmoud

**Meaning**

Incarcerated, one is not only deprived of freedom, one is separated from society.

Recalling Berger’s notion that separation presents fears of meaninglessness (Berger 1967), we can see how religion could create meaning which would make prison a more tolerable ordeal.

For Jameelah Haddad, Islam provides a clear meaning. With it she knows her purpose.

The understanding...to know what your purpose is on this earth, and to know that there is a hereafter, and why you’re on this earth...and that this here earth is temporary, and that’s enough right there. – Jameelah Haddad

Khadijah Perkins also committed to Islam while she was in prison. Here she explains how knowing God is in charge alleviates the stress of prison life for Muslims.

If you practice and follow the principles of the religion, you can do your time easier, and you don’t stress about a lot of the things that go on because you know God is in control, and you’ll be taken care of. Like you have a guardian angel watching you. You don’t have to worry so much about things that are happening that you may not like. You just accept your life and try to be the best Muslim you can be. That makes a lot of the stresses that people go through in prison less for
the Muslim, because they are basically depending on God to change their lives as they change themselves. – Khadijah Perkins

Ja’far Saadiq was also less stressed, and more hopeful in prison once he embraced Islam:

I came into Islam because of my spiritual need. My soul needed a change. And I didn’t come for any racial motivation or anything like that. I came trying to better myself. And the spiritual message that [Imam W. Deen Mohammed] brought for me cleared the air, and with it I could clearly see I can get out of prison. With the message he was delivering I could see I could get out of prison. – Ja’far Saadiq

While Dan Tucker and Jerome Ingles are Christian, their comments below resemble those of Khadijah Perkins that practicing their faith reduced stress and made doing time easier.

So I was in the guidance center and I was going to all the Christian programs. I had a relationship with God everyday, prayer and reading my word. I felt a real peace. I wasn’t concerned with my time in jail. I was fully accepting of the fact that I had committed crimes and I was paying for them and this was just the way that it was. – Dan Tucker

I didn’t have anything to hide anymore, I didn’t have anything to prove anymore. I had lived everything, everything those guys had done, I had done. I had been through all of that, and I think that’s what helps me out now...cause I’m not trying to impress anybody... Because I actually was trying to live[Christianity] out, it made prison life so easy for me. I wasn’t scared – Jerome Ingles

So a sense of meaning, and an internal freedom during confinement provide conceptual incentives for continued participation in faith groups. For some inmates, however, the incentives are more than just conceptual.

*Increased Status and Improved Associations*

In addition to the benefits of faith involvement they mention above, some former inmates who participated in the study mention advantages to faith involvement that
are specifically social, pertaining to their interactions with friends, family, and fellow inmates. Prison presents unique social conditions, often involving a dramatic social transition for the entering prisoner. Furthermore, many of the former inmates interviewed portray their social lives prior to incarceration as strained and difficult. These circumstances create a context wherein the community aspects of faith involvement hold a special appeal. Additionally, the idiosyncratic criteria for social status in prison make the social implications for faith community involvement complicated and contextually specific. Some participants experienced improved social status and better relationships through their faith group involvement.

If we accept a rational choice premise, that “Individuals act rationally, weighing the costs and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits” (Iannaccone 1997:26), which implies that part of what makes certain social ties valuable is the benefit they provide. One, then, would want to conserve or cultivate the ties that maximize benefit, i.e., social status. Though these authors do not credit this idea as having been born out of Weberian notions of religiosiy, Weber did discuss religion as associated with preservation of status, albeit somewhat differently. Richard Bulliet, writing about conversion to Islam, also notes that, “no one willingly converts from one religion to another if by virtue of conversion he markedly lowers his social status” (Bulliet 1979).

More than one of the ex-felons who turned to Islam in prison mention that Islam carries some respect, especially in prison, but also in certain communities outside.
As a Muslim] people didn’t mess with you. The population of prisoners pretty much know that the Muslims mind their own business. They’re not involved in drugs, alcohol and other kinds of things. They stick to themselves. There was a certain level of respect and courtesy was afforded. – Ja’far Saadiq

I get a lot of respect when I cover, especially in this environment that I work in, especially working around here in the tenderloin in San Francisco, where there’s dope and prostitution, you know? I don’t go through some of the problems. Because sometimes people can see me walking and they’ll say, ‘Hey Sister, how you doin’?’ and then I’ve been surprised how many homeless people with a bottle in their hand, know what Islam is that will give me the greeting, “As-salaam-alaikum,” you know that are believers who have just strayed from the path. – Jameelah Haddad

In the prison, Muslims always get a lot of respect. They know the Muslims are not going to take sides on the strength of color... Of all the people in the prison, all of those gangs, are together for the protections it affords. The Muslims are the only people who don’t come together for the purpose of protection. I can’t speak for the other religious groups. – Rachid Abdullah

Some of the Christians also found enhanced respect and social clout because of their involvement in the chapel.

There’s two spirits in the man, the spirit of humanity of a carnal mind – it operates through instinct. But when I was born again God opened up the spiritual – the spiritual truth in my life. And I no longer see things in a human way. Like I could see potential in people. When they talked to me I was always influential in a positive way. And as I went through doing my prison time, people were uplifted by me. I got a nickname, they used to call me “preacher” and “reverend.” Then, men in the prison used to ask me to pray for them. One of the brothers that was walking in the yard that used to share the Gospel, he had to transfer to another yard, right? And he asked me to share the Gospel. – Tommy Iglesias

Tommy Iglesias emphasizes that being born again allowed him to be influential in a positive way. Jerome Ingles reflects a similar role in being a help to people.

I was actually being a help to people, people needed me, and there’s nothing like being needed. When people need you, and they’re happy to see you...I was always respected. I was an important brother to a lot of people because of the position I held in the chapel because I was always a chapel clerk. I was a chapel
clerk...so that gave me a position of some prominence, so sociologically that kind of pumps you up, makes you feel like you're somebody. – Jerome Ingles

Both of these men experienced an elevation in their own sense of importance through their involvement in the Christian faith. Both had to become rather involved in order to experience that. Bill Roberts, however, was a “jailhouse lawyer,” and had an alternate source of status.

The fact that I surrendered to Jesus Christ and I consider my rear-end saved doesn’t mean I’m not going to talk to you. I don’t care if you’re a Torah-thumping Muslim or whatever they do, you’re still a human being. If you got a legal problem, come on, Man, let’s sit down, let me help you. You want to talk about religion? I’d prefer not to because I don’t know it that well. I just know what’s in my heart today. But I didn’t start excluding or including anyone because of this. It just didn’t make any sense. Jesus didn’t. I get all of my strength out of how Jesus acts. And he certainly didn’t exclude anyone out of anything. – Bill Roberts

Unlike most of the participants, Bill’s social circles in prison were not exclusively Christian. Now that he is out of prison, however, they are.

For Jerome Ingles, religious involvement improved his social life in the sense that it gave him tools to mend ties that were torn by his previous life and his incarceration.

When I got saved in 1990, one of the pastor’s instructions to me was to start writing to [my daughter] even though I wasn’t getting anything back. So I started writing her all the time. When I got out, contacted her...I got her number and I called. I ended up leaving her a message: I’m out, I’m a different man, the things you’ve been reading about me are true – everything you heard about once was true, too, but if you give me a chance to show you who I am now, I’d love to have an opportunity to be your dad. She gave me a call 6 months later...And then she called me and the rest is history. – Jerome Ingles

And for David Ringer, religious involvement gave him an opportunity to have new and better relationships.
In prison, you pretty much have to decide how you want to live your life, who you want to associate with...I associated with a group of people who were reserved. My friends were people who read the Bible, sang in church...I associated with those people as a matter of choice...I decided to convert to Catholicism, and thought this would provide a support network. – David Ringer

In this chapter we saw comparisons between prison and general populations on faith affiliation and participation. These show that prisoners participate in religious activity and services, perhaps even more than people in the general, non-incarcerated population. Many social theories say that faith is often sought to allay misery, and the statements of participants seem to support that thesis. Furthermore, successful court battles have combined with a general sense among prison officials that faith participation can be beneficial to prison order and prisoner conduct, to produce a prison system in this state that is relatively tolerant of religious volunteers. Their presence, along with the apparent benefit of freedom behind bars and meaning in crisis, give prisoners ample reasons to attend religious services and get involved in faith. And yet, we are reminded of the findings from past studies, that it is a very small minority of prisoners who actually attend faith services regularly or truly adopt a faith-oriented lifestyle. In the next chapter, we will begin to look at why that might be.
Chapter III: How Prison Culture Hinders Faith Involvement

"...Rationality usually to some extent involves the subjective weighing of anticipated rewards and costs when making choices." (Stark and Finke 2000:85 emphasis original)

Past studies of religion in prison have focused on the impact that faith participation has had on deviance, with little regard to the implicit finding that it has such an effect on a very small percentage of prisoners. In this next chapter, we will hear study participants discuss some of the difficulties they experienced as they became more deeply involved in their faith groups. Through a particular theoretical lens, these difficulties may help explain the low numbers of devout prisoners found in earlier studies.

Rodney Stark is one of the most prominent sociologists on the subject of religion, and has published notable pieces on the topic of religion and crime control (Hirschi and Stark 1969; Stark, Doyle et al. 1980; Stark and Bainbridge 1996). Most recently, he has turned his focus to a systematic theory of religion, spearheading the current trend toward rational choice theories of religion (Stark 1997; Stark and Finke 2000). One of the characteristic modus operandi of rational choice theory is to demonstrate how actors weigh costs and benefits in making choices. All of the ex-felons interviewed for this study mention some ways that their faith alleviated the pressure and misery of their lives as offenders and/or as prisoners, and brought them psychic and social rewards, but they all mention as well that belonging to that faith group made life harder inside in other ways. The consistency of these remarks is evocative of Stark's recent work and of the rational choice perspective in general. Moreover, it is an
unprecedented application of this theoretical perspective to the topic of faith in prison.

Rational choice theory, while growing in popularity among sociologists of religion, has not yet been used as a means for understanding religion among criminal offenders. Here we will begin to apply the theory to the prison context, keeping in mind that this is not a theory-driven analysis. So, looking at the different sorts of statements from participants about their faith experiences and choices, we will selectively use rational choice theory’s insightful suggestion that an analysis should consider the ways that costs and benefits are assessed by actors in their religious choices, but we will do so without adopting the theoretical perspective in toto. The possibility that this eclectic use of theory offends the theorists themselves notwithstanding, where a certain theory fits the data and lends clarity to what can at times be an unwieldy mass of information, it will be used.

Below we will look at how participants describe the challenges or costs of religious group membership in prison. The difficulties articulated below may prompt some prisoners to lose faith, or to avoid it altogether. But these prisoners who leave or avoid the faith groups are largely missing from our sample. Those who are included are the ones who stayed in the faith, despite the challenges they name here, and it appears to have solidified their commitment. And, as we will see in the following sections, the nature of the costs for Muslim affiliation is quite different from those for Christian affiliation.
Islamic Costs

The costs described by Muslim study participants, both former inmates and *da’wah* workers, differ substantially from those described by Christian participants. Specifically, Muslims describe experiencing anti-Islamic prejudice at the hands of staff and prison administration, discrimination that was originally against the Nation of Islam, but has been exacerbated since the 9-11 attacks. They also discuss some *costs* of Muslim involvement that have nothing to do with prejudice, but are simply dimensions of a faith that requires a good deal from its adherents.

Unequal Treatment

While they do not play it up, all of the Muslims confirmed that administrators and staff are sometimes unsupportive in their prisons. In addition to recent climate changes in the national attitude toward Islam, this sense that there is a lack of support for Muslims in prison has some historic background. Prior to 1975, when Elijah Muhammad died, the Muslim movement in US prisons was that of the Nation of Islam (NOI). NOI is an Islam-based movement that emphasizes a virtuous lifestyle free of drugs, adultery, and criminal behavior. It has also been known as a nationalist movement that espouses black empowerment, black ascendancy and segregation. As Berger writes, “the disintegration of the plausibility of theodicies legitimating social inequalities is potentially revolutionary in its consequences” (Berger 1967:60). In the 1960s and 70s, NOI did set out to undermine the plausibility of Christian theodicies (e.g., the meek shall inherit the earth; turn the other cheek, etc.), which it saw as legitimizing social inequalities, with the intent of turning Black Christians into Black Muslims, revolutionaries in a religious as well as in a political sense.
Ja'far Saadiq was in prison in California at this time and he converted to the Nation of Islam while Elijah Muhammad was still alive.

At that time the state didn’t recognize our religion as a legitimate religion. And we had an inmate minister and we didn’t have a chaplain or a minister from the outside like Islam has now. And we actually had to file a lawsuit...I was a part of the 1972 lawsuit. We sued the State of California, the governor, California Department of Corrections, [the prison], the Warden, and some of the other officials at the time. And the and then we settled the case in 1975 after Imam W. Deen Mohammed became the leader of Nation of Islam and began to initiate a series of reforms. We settled the case out of court on the condition that they would acknowledge our religion as a legitimate religion and hire Muslim ministers, was the language we used at the time, and later a budget was associated with that and now we have staff all over the state. – Ja'far Saadiq

He refers to the case settling in 1975, when Elijah Muhammad died and his son W. Deen Mohammed changed the movement dramatically in the direction of Orthodox Sunni Islam. Now NOI has relatively little presence in the California prisons.

Instead, practicing Muslims and the state-employed imams in these prisons are Sunni Muslims who practice according to the Qur'an and irrespective of race. Despite changes in the kind of Islam that we now see in the prison, the legacy of the Nation of Islam lingers and prison administrators, staff, chaplains and inmates sometimes assume that the Muslims in prison are oriented toward black nationalism. Some of the Muslim ex-felons interviewed express a sense of unequal treatment even today.

We constantly fought for our religious rights: to wear head gear, to wear our clothes modestly, and not be forced to tuck shirts in and wear tight pants, those kinds of things... For many years, many times we ended up having to challenge and protest the practices of the prison to allow us, for instance, to cover our hair, to wear modest clothing. The head covering was an ongoing issue in the federal system...It is still an ongoing problem in the prison system...especially as our numbers increased. Because it was seen as, I think, women basically like head scarves, whether they're Muslim or not, and when Muslims are allowed to wear head coverings for religious reasons and the other women in the prison are not
allowed to wear scarves…it probably was seen as favoritism or something. – Khadijah Perkins

Sometimes when you’re incarcerated, sometimes you have problems with the staff. And that’s their lack of understanding; they’re not educated. You know, at times when you’re making prayers, making salat, I’ve had officers come tell me to get up off the floor, and I just keep praying. I’ve had staff walking over me when I’m making salat. And after I get through I come up to them and say, “don’t do me like that!” I’ve had some staff who were Muslims who were feared to let the other staff, that wouldn’t even give the greetings, because they were afraid of what their peers, their co-workers might think. – Jameelah Haddad

Even after winning their battle, and after the changes in the black Muslim faith, Ja’far Saadiq experienced unequal religious protection.

There was a period, yes, when the prison administration, sometimes they saw Islam in the wrong light. They saw us like they saw gangs. And that sometimes was difficult. They treat you like you were illegitimate, making certain of our practices almost impossible, like fasting – [they wouldn’t allow] eating after sunset. If you were caught sneaking food out of the kitchen you got infractions or write-ups for disciplinary action...And then there were times when they wouldn’t permit us access to the chapel, we would meet on the bleachers in the rain. – Ja’far Saadiq

Imam Mahmoud who was never an inmate, but is a prison chaplain, tells of his own struggle with prison administrators just a few years ago.

One year for Black History Month, a Muslim inmate wanted to include something about Islam in the Black History Month program. They said no, that they were keeping religion out of the program, but the Christian religion was represented through gospel music, etc. She was upset and voiced that and was sent to the hole for two weeks. – Imam Mahmoud

James Beckford’s study of chaplains in the UK also found that Muslim services received low priority and that Muslim volunteers and visiting chaplain created a sense of uneasiness among the head chaplains assigned to manage them in the British system (Beckford and Gilliat 1998).
**Post 9-11 Climate**

According to some of the Muslims who minister to the inmates, the latent hostility toward Islam by people in the prison became more overt after 9-11.

On September 14, I came to the prison and the exits and entrances were all closed. The staff searched me suspiciously because of my name...[After 9-11] one of the things that happened at the prison was they [the administration at the prison] were really nervous about what we Muslims were going to say, so they would actually sit in and listen to me the first week...after that event...Not only were those planes hijacked, which was a horrendous thing to do, but Islam was hijacked. Following the event, media depictions of Islam were highly inflammatory and inaccurate.

I’ve had to deal with that among some staff. The administration has taken a more conservative line now in how they relate to the Islamic community inside the prison. You know, things we could do in the past we were not able to do this year...Some people [in the prison administration] didn’t have a good question of us before [9-11]. They kind of had an incorrect view, and [9-11] just made it worse. –Imam Mahmoud

Maryam Sabree is a volunteer who ministers to inmates at several prisons. She also expresses her frustration with the post 9-11 conditions below.

I’ve tried to [get funding for Islamic social service programs], but I’ve found that in order to get some type of funding or to do anything, you know, other organizations like the Catholics or the other big churches and all these other places, they get non-profit fundings for certain things. Now with the climate, Islamic climate today, everything is being questioned, you know, whatever you’re doing as far as being a Muslim in concerned – the money, appropriate money, things like that. The climate is different right now...[Since 9-11] I find that – at the women’s facility a lot of the things they allowed, they’re cutting back. For example, the Christians are allowed to go out and the inmates on the minimum security can go out and spend a weekend or two or three weeks with a Christian church when they go out on retreats. But the Muslim community, which happens only what twice a year, can’t even get time to go off of the facility into a community in Oakland to have their Eid with the community, whereas before they were able to do that. You know, so we find that some things are cut back. And that’s why I encourage the ladies to continue what they have, and don’t not come out or put other things above what your time is because if they don’t use it they’re going to cut back on it, and they have been cutting back.
Maryam’s frustration with “cut-backs” since 9-11 extends beyond prison administrators to the other chaplains, particularly the head chaplain, at FWF.

[It is] even to the point where certain chaplains move the area that you’re allotted, and they want to move the areas. I had that experience this Sunday, where the Mormons came in and because the chaplain at the time saw that it was maybe one or two people there and that they were going to have – the Mormons were going to have 14 people – they decided they were going to move us to another room versus the room where we were already – where we always be all the time. And due to the fact that the sister was in there already praying, and since she was praying I went to pray and the sister came back and said, “No, this is our time allotted.” You know, they have their little sections where they have it. And due to the fact that the Mormons couldn’t get that room, they left. It’s not [the Mormons’] regular time, but [the Christian chaplains] were willing to move us, for their time. You know, we only have one time, so if they decide they want to come in early and do something, you know, they want to move us, that’s not right. That kind of thing didn’t happen as much before...

And Maryam feels there are now greater restrictions on Muslim materials coming into the prison. Again, her frustration is both with the administration and FWF’s Christian chaplains.

Due to the fact that the administration won’t allow us to give them anything, you know, we can’t actually give them books. There can be Qur’ans donated from an organization. They’ve cut back on a lot of things that we were able to do. We were able to bring in materials that different Muslims had that they didn’t need and would donate to the sisters. Since 9-11, a lot of those things have been cut back. Where they were giving clothes and scarves – and those things were only to be utilized during the Islamic Eid or Festival – and now they don’t want all that coming in. Now they’ve come to the point where the only thing you can donate to them is from a legitimate organization – or a legitimate company or vendor. Vendor is the word that they use...I asked the head chaplain that I was going to be able to find some Islamic materials so we could start showing them a little bit about how to read Arabic and the Qur’anic alphabet, and going through just like you would do the alphabet, and writing. And that’s apart of something because you haven’t really read a Qur’an until you’ve read it in its original language. And so you have to start learning it, not to talk to another Arab or to have conversations, but to really know your Book, which is the Qur’an and the way the Prophet teaches it, peace and blessings be upon him. So I asked the first time and he said no – he kind of was vague about it. And then I asked the [Catholic] chaplain this Sunday and she said unless I got the copyright, then that was the...
only way. You know, the Christians can bring stuff in, but she told me I had to get the copyright. And I said, “Excuse me, but if the copyright – if they put it on the Internet, then they’re giving you the copyright to be able to use the material, and I’m just going to use it in a book form, you know what I’m saying?” And so they said, well, unless I get the copyright. So I’m going to send a letter to the head chaplain and ask him, because if it’s coming off the Internet they giving you the rights by allowing it to be released on the Internet. And then she said, “Oh, well we’ve had problems from this before.” And I’m like, “We never had that.” You know what I’m saying?…She’s telling me I have to get the copyrights and I’m very uncomfortable with that. – Maryam Sabree

Maryam’s frustration is clearly acute. Although I was not able to observe any of the things that she complained about, I did observe some other things that stood out as representative of different attitudes toward Muslims and Christians in prison. The first observation comes from my field notes (3/23/03). I was at the Protestant service for Reception Center inmates at CVP. The minister was a visitor from a local Assemblies of God church. About forty minutes into his sermon, the minister brought up the war in Iraq. He said, “Iraq does not have the Gospel. God wants the Word in there. Now we’ve got missionaries in Iran, Afghanistan, Russia. We’re fighting to get the Word of God out. This war is between God and the Devil! The Devil has been doomed! You going down with him?” (Field Notes 3-23-03) He did not mention Islam specifically, but the implication was clear: that whatever religion was in Iraq, if it was not Christian, it was not good.

I also noticed at the Protestant services as well as the Catholic services at CVP that there were no Correctional Officers (CO) present, for either the Reception Center inmates or the mainline population. At the mainline service for Muslims, however, a CO stopped in twice. The first time she just appeared to be checking on things, but
the second time she actually interrupted the prayer to announce that “chow” would be
taking place shortly (Field Notes 3-23-03, Field Notes 6-1-03, Field Notes 6-6-03).

Finally, I went to celebrate Eid at FWF in December of 2003. Out of respect, I
covered my head for the services. The Imam had mentioned that this would be a nice
thing to do. The Catholic chaplain at FWF was assisting with the paperwork for the
Muslim volunteers, visitors and me as we waited to enter the facility. During a break
in her work, I approached the Catholic chaplain to introduce myself and solicit an
interview. She seemed uninterested in talking to me and averted her eyes as I spoke.
I described the study I was conducting and asked if she would be interested in talking
with me about her work as a prison chaplain. She said, “no,” rather flatly and finally.
I gave her a card and encouraged her to call me if she found the time. She never
contacted me. I was surprised by her response, as nobody else that I had approached
to interview for the study said, “no.” I wasn’t sure if her closed response was related
to the appearance that I was Muslim, since I was visiting with the Muslim chaplain
and I was wearing the traditional head-cover. I did not want to be paranoid, but I was
reminded of something Imam Mahmoud had said: “The strange thing about prejudice
is that you can feel it sometimes. You know, you can pick it up like a vibe. You
know people are judging you because of how you look. For some people, there’s
nothing you can do to change that, no matter what you do” (Imam Mahmoud 6/2/02).

Finally, an interview that aired on CNN June 12, 2002 also fueled the argument that
Islam in prison, particularly since 9-11, is viewed somewhat unfavorably. Ted
Conover is an author who recently wrote a book about his experiences as a correctional officer at Sing Sing. Below are excerpts from his interview with Paula Zahn:

PAULA ZAHN: Now, a look at the enemies within. Are U.S. prisons a breeding ground for terrorist groups seeking American operatives? Well, officials now believe that dirty bomb suspect, Abdullah al Muhajir, a U.S. citizen, converted to Islam while in prison, as did the alleged shoe bomber, Richard Reid. Has the hatred of America become an effective recruiting tool behind bars?

Ted Conover spent ten months as a corrections officer at New York's Sing Sing Prison, while he was researching for his new book, "Newjack," and he joins us now -- good morning -- welcome.

...How fertile do you think American prisons are for converting people to Islam, for example, among other religions, and turning that to a brand of radical politics? How carefully do you think prison guards are watching this kind of activity in prisons across America? And is it something that the FBI should be paying more attention to?

TED CONOVER: It's funny. It's kind of like 9/11. Until it happened, people weren't even thinking along those lines. And I think the same will be true in prisons, now that we see that Jose Padilla converted to Islam and in a very negative way, got involved with groups outside the prison afterward. I think now prisons are probably going to be on high alert, and there will be extra scrutiny given toward the kind of religious programming they have and who is running it.

You know, religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution, but prisons have a lot of control over who the imams can be, for example. And they come in all stripes, you know, from very conservative to very activists [sic] and revolutionary, and prisons usually do a good job in keeping the wrong kinds of imams out of the system. But this will keep everyone on their toes.

ZAHN: But you can't guarantee that. So I guess my question is: What is the likelihood of an imam coming in who doesn't have America's best interest in mind, polluting the mind of a young convert in prison and potentially training them to carry out some kind of mission? Is that farfetched, or is that possible?

CONOVER: Of course it's possible, and actually I think we are going to see more examples of revolutionaries coming out of prison. I mean, this is a longstanding pattern. You know, at least -- talking about going back to the Black Panthers, they organized in prison, and there are a lot of sort of racially oriented gangs in prisons. There are religiously oriented gangs.

You hear the phrase "white devil" a lot when you are a prison officer in New York State. Most officers are white, most inmates are not. They resent the system
that's holding them. They resent you. They resent the American flag on your shoulder a lot of times, and this can grow if it's not carefully watched.

The full transcript is available from CNN, and can be analyzed from the social constructionist perspective as claims-making using both the *rhetoric of calamity* and the *rhetoric of unreason* (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993). To practice Islam under conditions of intolerance appears to present the Muslim inmate with a set of costs. The disadvantages described by these participants not only represent less privilege for Muslims as compared to Christians, it represents a bigotry and injustice which in turn becomes insult and a further sense of powerlessness. But for the participants in this study, these costs are not sufficient to dissuade their participation.

*Expensive Religion*

There are other kinds of costs exacted for participation in Islam in prison. Islam is what rational choice theory refers to as an *expensive* religion, meaning that religious involvement touches many dimensions of a participant’s life.

The higher the tension of their religious group, the less distinction people draw between religious and secular matters: religious doctrines and practices impinge on everything else, defining with whom they associate, how they spend their leisure time, sometimes even how they dress and speak. (Stark and Finke 2000:145)

Ex-felons who converted to Islam in prison find that the faith does indeed direct what were previously secular aspects of their lives. Here Jameelah describes how Islam

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17 According to the social constructionist perspective, social problems are defined as such by claims-makers who can use a number of styles in asserting the problem in question, including invoking images of “widespread devastation” (30) or “hidden forces” capable of “manipulating” or “brainwashing” (36). Public opinion can be affected by claims-making like the CNN interview, and it could conceivably contribute to a less tolerant attitude toward Muslims in American prisons.
changes some of these aspects and in doing so announces her faith prominently.

Earlier she told us that this announcement of her faith sometimes brings her a level of respect in the neighborhood where she works. Here she frames it differently.

[Islam] changed the way I dressed, what color fingernail polish I wear. It just changed a lot; it changed a lot...In my work field, I have some co-workers that don't understand it, you know and I enlighten them on it. I have, I can tell you sometimes when I go on job interviews and I'm covered, it can affect, you know, when they see me walk in there, everything changes. You know, I went for a job interview to be a counselor working with children, but it a Christian home. The man called me back and said, “I know you’re a Muslim, but do you think that will be a problem with us being Christian?” “No!” And I didn’t get the job, no I didn’t. But I didn’t want to work there anyway. – Jameelah Haddad

For Ja’far Saadiq being a Muslim did not only affect with whom he associates and how he dresses and speaks, as Stark and Finke suggest. It also modified how he walks.

I had some difficulty with this, like I said, I was 19, just turned 20. One Muslim guy told me that I didn’t walk like a Muslim. I though he was questioning my credibility...At the time my walk, my gait was a tough guy kind of walk, you know, ‘Wha’dyou gonna do?’ I’m saying that in my walk. I had an arrogant stroll. I had to change that. It took me a while to even understand that my demeanor and my disposition was contradictory to what I was claiming. Islam says you’re a peaceful person, and my walk said I was an aggressive person. So I had to make some adjustments. There were just certain things I didn’t involve myself in because I was a Muslim...Drugs...Alcohol...Homosexual behavior. So Islam did keep me from some activities that may have been tempting to me to some extent had I not had the belief system that I had. – Ja’far Saadiq

Jameelah is very aware of the responsibility that wearing her faith on the outside implies. Not only is she mindful of her fingernail polish and of the impression that her head-covering makes, she is also very conscious of her behavior because her appearance makes her a representative of the faith. So involvement in the faith requires an investment of every moment she spends in public.
By me being a Muslim, a lot of people look at me a different way, so there are certain things that I have to watch and guard in terms of what I say and what I do, and who I do it in front of. A lot of people, believe it or not, respect Islam, so you have to be mindful of how you treat people, because, like my husband says, cause you don’t want to put a black eye on the religion. – Jameelah Haddad

For the most part, the costs for the Muslim inmate have to do with battling preconceptions about Islam in the shadow of the Nation of Islam and of the Islamic extremist attacks on September 11, 2001. These battles are most often with prison administrators and staff, although Imam Mahmoud tells of one Muslim woman whose cellmate felt that Islam was a “devil religion.” The other costs are simply those that accompany involvement in a faith that permeates many dimensions of an adherent’s lifestyle.

**Christian Costs**

Like Muslims, Christians also faced a premium for involvement in their faith groups. These costs are of a different order, though, and are almost exclusively concerned with peer interactions, rather than interactions with authority. The Christian men who converted in prison without exception mention the challenge of being Christian in a setting where showing weakness is practically a death-wish. These men found in prison that non-religious inmates frequently challenged their faith, questioning their toughness and testing the authenticity of their beliefs. Furthermore, because the Christian chapel is generally filled with inmates from many different ethnicities, the Christian inmates were often accused of race betrayal.
Where Christians are Wimps

Several former inmates describe how being a Christian made life more difficult in prison because of the pressure to be tough, a theme that evokes images of Gresham Syke’s seminal work *Society of Captives* (Sykes 1958), and that is echoed in James Gilligan’s book on violence. Gilligan writes, “The male gender role generates violence by exposing men to shame if they are not violent and rewarding them when they are” (Gilligan 1996:233). In the prison, where male gender-role expectations are uniquely intensified (Sabo, Kupers, et al. 2001), the shame to which an inmate exposes himself when he chooses to follow a non-violent Christian lifestyle put Shane Johnson in a physically precarious position.

It was a whole lot more difficult [to be a Christian in prison] because guys looked upon you if you were religious, you were a wimp. The only ones they didn’t look down upon, they didn’t see them as wimps were the Black Muslims. They did not, you know, those brothers had a different sort of belief system. You know, they were not seen as wimps, ... Um, but um, it made life more difficult, Moira, because people saw you as a wimp, so you had to, if you were going to follow the teachings of Christ, how were you going to, for example, turn the other cheek, and yet do time in prison? So you had to come up with some creative ways of letting people know ‘I love Jesus.’

Religion is different on the inside... You come up to me and say you know what man I hear you’re Christian, I ought to just slap your head off. I gotta deal with that cause we ain’t going anywhere. And if I walk away with him thinking in his mind that he can just slap me and walk away, I’m in trouble. Some kind of way I’ve got to deal with that situation. That happens out here I can just walk away. You can’t walk away in prison. Makes sense? – Shane Johnston

Roy McLean, a Catholic lay minister, understands the challenge that Christian inmates face in maintaining their faith in prison.

Taking [the messages received in the chapel] back to the mainline is difficult. Some inmates see the religious prisoners as weaker because they are religious. It takes a long time to change a lifestyle. How do you cope with that when you can’t just pop somebody in the teeth? They need to be mentored by another
inmate. Lifers are at the top of the scale [in the prison hierarchy]. Religious inmates can get through that process if they can get a lifer to mentor them. – Roy McLean

Reverend Ruskin from CVP also recognizes the pressure that the inmate subculture exerts on inmates who are trying to embrace a Christian life. He describes how he used the inmate subculture itself to combat this problem.

In 1984 [when I began at CVP], church-going inmates were subject to being raped. I tried to put an end to that...I was able to get real gang members in [to church]. It lent credibility to going to church, having real shot-callers laying down their lives for the Lord and non-violence. From 1984 to 1986 it went from 5 to 300 chapel attendees. – Rev. Roger Ruskin

**Race Loyalty**

Complicating the issue of “toughness” in prison is the question of race loyalty. Messerschmidt, in discussing the “cool pose of the badass” and the violence associated with it, says that subscribing to this tough public persona is a “specialized means” for transcending class and race domination (Messerschmidt 1993:122). Messerschmidt offers that in order to “rework ideals of hegemonic masculinity,” men in specific social milieux, such as the street, the workplace and the family, will sometimes engage in certain forms of aggressive, violent or criminal behavior in order to offset the constraints associated with the setting (Messerschmidt 1993). In prison, race domination is uniquely constructed, with every group in a potentially in the role of oppressor and with every inmate in an unquestionable position of oppression. This sets up an environment that is ripe for racially driven aggression,
with each group attempting to reassert hegemonic masculinity, among each other and against their oppression. Sabo and Kupers write:

Gender and Race are inextricably linked in the daily lives of men in prison. As the harshness and brutality of prison life intensify, the lines that separate men inside become ever more rigid, and many of the worst aspects of ultramasculine behavior come to the fore. (Sabo, Kupers et al. 2001:20).

In this section, we will look at how race is tied in with the pressures many of the participants in this study experienced as they became involved in their faith groups in prison.

California prisons are ethnically diverse places. Most Latinos and Filipinos come from Catholic backgrounds, although evangelical movements are growing in both Central America and the Philippines. And most African Americans and whites in America are raised in one or another Protestant faith. The result is that the groups assembled in the prison chapels, both Catholic and Christian, are multi-ethnic. In CVP’s mainline Protestant chapel service, the ethnic distribution of attendees was relatively even, with 12 white men, 10 black men, 7 Latinos, 1 Filipino and 1 other Asian. In the Catholic chapel the group was less even, but just as diverse with 28 Latinos, 4 white men, 2 Filipinos, and one black man.

Father Flannigan and Reverend Ruskin both discuss how they deliberately went against the sometimes unwritten, sometimes official rule of prison segregation in their work as Catholic and Protestant prison chaplains, respectively.
I'd bring in hamburgers, enchiladas and all that. Anytime I'd have a group, if I had food for 12, I'd get three whites, three blacks, three Latins, and three Asians...and three Indians. I'd always make sure I had a mixed group... The more [racially and ethnically] varied the community, the better I like it. Which is maybe out of personal, cultural – It's very scriptural. You know, we're all God's children. – Father Flannigan

Reverend Ruskin also used his role to contradict the segregation that is imposed in prison.

Once the numbers went up, the church self-segregated where blacks would sit on one side, whites on the other side, and Hispanics separately. The CO's keep them racially divided if it will bring more peace...I would stop service and say "we will not go any further until each of you gets up and sits next to someone who is opposite of you [racially]"...The church attendees stopped self-segregating. – Rev. Roger Ruskin

Prisoners confirm that associating with other Christians who were not of their same race was problematic.

We basically revolutionized what that yard thought of Christians. We had a spot on the yard, called the C spot where all of the Christians gathered, even though we were interracial, which had never happened before. Before... all the Christians showed their love for one another inside that chapel, then once you came out of that chapel, it was a written law on the prison yard, that blacks should be around blacks and whites should be around whites...Well, we started a Christian gang. And it was interracial, and wound up getting big respect. – Jerome Ingles

Sometimes the pressure from race groups in the prison can be intense and threatening.

In Tommy Iglesias's description we can see that negotiating Christian lifestyle and prison culture can be tricky.

Brother Mather, he used to, on the prison yard, he used to preach the Gospel...He used to take a lot of abuse on the yard. I remember, see he was white, right? And the Skinheads and the Aryan brothers, they'd walk up to him and they would spit on his face and tell him, "Hey, you can't be talking about God on the yard," and all that. He didn't care. He'd take the abuse, although he could kill those people. He was an officer in the army, but he was what-do-you-call-it, he was a special
forces. He had that in him to be able to hurt somebody, but because of his belief in Christ, he wanted to be an example. People would come and spit in his face...and he would just sit there and wipe his face off and go back to doing what he was doing. He could have hurt these people, and yet he would take it. And he would go forward. That man was powerful in preaching the Gospel. To me he was something else... For me, [being a Christian didn’t make it more difficult] because I’m an intimidating looking person anyway. A lot of times it was race and ethnic. For white males it was rougher. The Caucasians are limited in numbers in most penitentiaries California. Mather was white and that made it hard for him to share the Gospel. Because they’re so limited in numbers, he’s valuable. He’s valuable to them in order to have status and be respected among the other races. The white gangs needed him, and the other white men made it harder for him. For me, it was easier because most of the Latin guys knew me. They were waiting for me to fall. – Tommy Iglesias

Tommy Iglesias is Latino, but Dan Tucker, who is white, also confirms that white gangs exacerbated the difficulty of avoiding the “wimp” jacket and still being a good Christian.

I was harassed and threatened by the Aryan Brotherhood. They’d say, "You’re embarrassing the white race"...There, segregation is voluntarily practiced by inmates. But the Christian group was Mexicans, whites and blacks, with the leader being a black guy. We would sing on the yard, not trying to stick out, just showing our devotion. Other inmates gave us a raft of crap about it...The Bible says not to be a tattle-tale, so you can’t run around being a sissy or a weakling. Somehow, you’ve got to be the weakest person there without being a weakling. And people think you’re weak because you’re a Christian...But if a person really does try to commit to God, supernatural protection happens upon them and if you really commit and stand up to the challenge, you earn a certain kind of respect...I had hope and the other people in prison didn’t. One of the reasons respect comes is because those people are hopeless. But after they test you and try you, they may not be ready to turn their lives open to God, but when they reach the end of their rope, they see you and have the expectation that they could change. – Dan Tucker

These prisoners had to choose between race loyalty and loyalty to the principles of their faith community, and they had to make that choice consciously, publicly and forcefully. Jerome Ingles, an African American, describes this further:
Either I was going to be fully Christian, or a lukewarm Christian, or stay where I was. It's impossible to be a lukewarm Christian in there, because if you're a lukewarm Christian in there, everybody who knows you knows you're not really a Christian. You still smoke weed, you're still lying, you still hang out with them. They know because the real Christians don't do any of that. They get laughed at, they get talked about, nobody really, you know, respects them. They think they're just scared. Because the Christians in prison were interracial, and everybody else was racially separated. So Christians had white friends, black friends, Hispanic friends, Asian friends. There was only a few of us so we were just each other's friends...So when you come out of one of those groups...if you're already in a gang, or in circles, and you decide to become a Christian – it's easy in one sense, because I already was a tough guy, so everybody knew, 'can't do nothing about it, you don't own him, if he wants to do it, let him do it.' But then at the same time, don't be fakin'. 'If you're fakin', you know too much about us.' I knew all their secrets. Either I'm going to be a Christian or not be a Christian, but you can't be straddling the fence. So I tell people all the time that it's difficult to become a Christian in prison, but it's easy to be one in prison...In prison [to become a Christian] you gotta say no to your race, basically. In prison, to walk into the church and say I'm going to be a Christian means you're making a drastic decision against some people that you have to see everyday. Because all of the whites are expected to be white, all of the blacks are expected to be black, all of the Hispanics are expected to be Hispanic, because there are race riots in prison. And if there's ever a race riot, everybody knows what side you're on...If blacks stab whites, then they lock the blacks and the whites up. You're always going to be affected by your race in prison, no matter what. But when you say you're going to be a Christian, what you're saying is, I'm willing to get locked up with you guys, but if there's ever a riot, don't expect me to be a part of it...don't expect my automatic loyalty simply because of the pigment of my skin. That doesn't guarantee my loyalty, regardless of what you guys are about to do, I won't be there.

I had a white friend who these guys just walked up and just jumped on, and I was standing there with him, so I tried to protect him. And because of that, me being black, getting in the middle of this white fight just set the whole prison crazy. Because I was trying to pull these guys off of him, and if some white guys are jumping on a white guy, a black guy trying to protect him is the last thing in the world you want to do, because then that puts all the black people in jeopardy, so now there's going to be a race riot. – Jerome Ingles

This finding of the higher tensions that exist for Christian inmates, once they begin to associate with Christian groups may help shed some light on Byron Johnson’s “paradoxical” 1997 finding that Prison Fellowship (PF) participants were actually more likely to be involved in prison infractions:
Somewhat unexpectedly... high PF participants (and their non-PF counterparts) were more likely than those in the low and medium PF participation categories (and in the non-PF sample) to have committed a serious infraction. Because we do not know the sequence of institutional infractions and participation in PF programs, we cannot address this rather paradoxical finding. Do inmates get into trouble and then attend religious programs, or do they attend religious programs and then commit serious rule violations? We suggest the former sequence (getting into trouble and then turning to religion) as more plausible” (Johnson, Larson et al. 1997).

The very consistent testimony of participants about challenges to Christian inmates on the yard in this study, however, suggest the inverse sequence.

Among the Muslim inmates, one would expect there to be less racial pressure because most of the Muslims in American prisons are black, and the exceptions are usually Arab, who are a very small minority in prison. But as Islam grows in popularity among Latinos, as two separate prison Imams indicate is happening, the issue of race solidarity and crossing those lines may be coming up for them. Rachid Abdullah recounts that one Latino he knew experienced a taste of the pressure felt by the Christian felons above.

I know there was this Mexican dude and his people used to give him a hard time. Even today with as much information that there is about Islam, a lot of people still look at it as a black religion. – Rachid Abdullah

Imam Mahmoud discusses the current influx of Latino prisoners into Islam, how social ties bring others in, and how the loyalty choice must be made.

Last time I came to county jail in SF, about 12 of the guys were Latino, the majority actually. Part of the reason was that one Sureno gets on the list and the other guys see it and sign up. The guards were warning me that they were going to try to have a meeting in there. I told them I know some of you are homies and you haven’t seen each other in a while, but that while they were there in our meeting, that they would have to show respect for the purpose of this meeting.
One of the guys who was a leader looked over to the others and gave them the nod to be respectful.

One Norteño gang leader took *shahadah*, the declaration one takes when one becomes a Muslim. I told him once you become a Muslim, the allegiance to Islam takes precedence over your allegiance to the gang. You have to stand for what is right, and be against what is wrong, even if it is in your own group, even if that group is Islam. He was trying to leave the gang, but they were pressuring him not to leave, intimidating people and all that. They were looking to him for leadership, and he was saying he wanted to leave it. So the prison put him in isolation from the other gang members. Now he’s at Corcoran, where they have him in isolation because they see him as a gang leader. [He told me] When I get out of here, I want to go back to my barrio, I have the respect on the street, and I want to go back to the streets and tell the young people that the gang is not the way to go. He’s got about 10 years to go. By the time he gets out he’ll be like early 40’s. – Imam Mahmoud

**A Walk That Is Real**

Challenges to inmates who profess to be religious come in many forms. One is on the basis of race, another is on the basis of the faith itself. Repeatedly the former felons make reference to the common accusation that one is just “hiding behind” the faith, hiding from prison life, from the prison authority. Dammer’s work on prison religion also intimates that some chapel participants in prison are there to hide, or for protection (Dammer 1992; Dammer 2002). Here, Nick McDonnell talks about the challenge of bringing the faith out onto the yard, and how his “walk” being “real” helped him avoid the stigma of hiding behind his Bible.

There’s another thing about folks who go to chapels and churches [in prison]. There’s a stigma associated with them. I wasn’t ever affected by it, but I suppose – it was one of these things where I was a little bit older and I was able to walk the yard, and lift weights – at that time we still had weights – and I was able to go to church, not only on Sunday, but whenever I could, and not have to do one or the other. In prison there’s this very, um, a social distinction. If you go to church you’re hiding from something. You can’t handle the yard. Or you go to the yard because, not because you don’t believe in God, but God’s going to spook you so bad that you can’t handle the church. To some extent I probably dealt with that stigma, but because my walk was real, I wasn’t hiding from... my brothers
because I was afraid of them, I was real in my relationship with God I was respected inside. And that’s just the way it worked out for me. It could have been different. There are stigmas associated with prisoners who go to church, I guess is what I’m trying to say. It didn’t affect me so much, but it has affected some. I saw guys who came to church and they had, maybe, crimes that were bad news, and it became public knowledge and then, they went to the yard and they were attacked, you know, they got stuck or something. And church was like a safe haven. They could maybe safe in church, but they went to the yard and had a problem. – Nick McDonnell

Jose Arboles also describes the hostile environment of the prison and the special difficulty of being a Christian there. Like Nick McDonnell, Jose Arboles feels that having a genuine walk allowed him to rise above the challenge.

My social groups, was, obviously you’ve done your work on this, but, it’s a whole nother world once you go behind that wall. It’s a world of its own. Unfortunately there’s a lot of anger; there’s a lot of hatred; there’s a lot of pain; there’s a lot of hurt; there’s a lot of death; there’s a lot of, a lot of negative stuff going on. A survival skill is to either clique-up and when you call them groups, that means you have to either associate with your kind, number one, whether you’re Hispanic, white, black or other. Your first natural instinct, and if it doesn’t become a natural instinct then somebody will question that. However, I’ve never been a loner – I’m pretty much a leader; I’m not a follower. And it was difficult because I chose not to follow and conform – to dress, to act, to talk, to even be with the people that I should have cliqued-up with. And it came close to getting me in trouble a couple of times. But I was actually schooled by some veteranos, some veterans, that had been in most of their lives, 20 years plus, and probably going to do another 50 years. But what was incredible about that situation was, I don’t know how it was a God intervention, but I can see how it was, only because to walk the walk that I walked was very difficult because you – it’s a form of security and you have to have some sort of backing in there. You have to have someone to lean on. And people that lean towards the church, they’re looked upon as weak people in the penal system. [Other inmates think,] “Naw, that’s just an excuse to change your life or to hide or to get away from mainstream rigor of what goes on in this world out here.” And as I started to join these groups not to better myself but starting to better others, of all races, whether they were Caucasian or black or whatever. I was part of these groups, the Squires group [like “straight life” or “scared straight” programs], [and] that educational group that was pioneering [young prisoners] to get their education. The works that I was doing at the chapel, I would sit with black men at and share. And I would sit with that Aryan with the big old swastika on his neck, you know, and I would talk to these people. And I maintained my walk.
Jose avoided being labeled as weak or as hiding by getting more involved in the benevolent programs and maintaining his walk. But the pressure and the fear were still there.

I wouldn’t conform to the normal conformities that you would normally have to. And it was very challenging. That’s why I say every moment was a nightmare, because you could never, it never comes face-to-face – if someone wants to confront you it’s going to come from behind. That’s through the grace of God I was able to walk through that yard from the Max building all the way to the Chapel which was, we used to call it the Gauntlet because it was all the Mexicans on this side, and all the blacks on this side, and the whites just stayed away, cause they didn’t want no part of that stuff. And I would just pray, and ask God to walk me through there one more time, day after day, day after day. And then they started to see, and I got talked to several times by some people, predominantly Hispanics, that whether you talk about Nuestra Familia or the Mexican Mafia, not so much for recruitment, but, “You know, you got to watch what you’re doing. You’re truly not associating with the people you should be associating with, not that their bad people, but they’re just not your race.” Well guess what? I don’t look at color. I look at people in their eyes, and I look at their heart. They’d say, “Well, OK.” I wasn’t given free rein, but I was actually approached by somebody on the echelon in terms of the prison gangs up there and he basically gave me free rein to just walk my walk because of what I was doing for people, and not just the Hispanics. But that was their concern was that I was bettering people. I could help them. And what I mean by helping them is that being involved in the Catholic church, I would write up letters. My job was to write up letters to get magazines brought in, posters, gifts, things that would benefit all convicts. And they knew that – Christmas cards, birth- you know whatever. And then we would give them out on Sundays and it got to the point where, “Hey, back off. Leave this guy alone.”...I mean I can see how that was truly God intervention. Those things just don’t happen in that world. They truly, truly don’t... I got at some people at times. And these are people. They just had some misfortunes going on in their lives. They’re not all animals, even though maybe they committed some horrendous crimes. But they were somebody’s baby at one point. They were somebody’s son. They were human beings. And I was told, and I’m still told to this day, and that’s the incredible gift of having God in your heart and allowing it to manifest, and wearing my cross on my sleeve on a daily basis...People say, convicts back then would say, “There’s something different about you.” And actually, it was attractive. People were attracted to me. I’ve been told I’m gregarious by nature. – Jose Arboles

Both Jose and Nick made their commitment very public in order to make them less vulnerable to attacks on the basis of their faith not being “real.” But for some of the
participants, making a public commitment proved difficult in prison, where they were loathe to be classified as wimps, at least initially.

Dan Tucker felt some embarrassment showing even the smallest gesture of his faith at first.

When I was in the county jail in that single cell, it was my habit to pray on my knees. When I was in a dormitory setting, though, I would have to get on my knees in front of everybody to pray. I didn’t want to give God the least that I had because I didn’t want to get on my knees in front of the others. – Dan Tucker

Tommy Iglesias also had some trouble making his commitment visible to the prison, but he eventually wore it with pride.

I remember [the brothers that believed in Christ] challenged me. They said, “You believe in God, but we never see you with a Bible.” And I said, “Aw, I don’t want to carry a Bible in the jail, you know, walk through the yard with it.” They said, “If you believe, Tom, and you claim to be a follower of Christ, Bro, you gotta start carrying a Bible.” So they put me to a test, right? And then I said “The heck with this! I believe, Man!” And one day I just [started to] carry the Bible with me. At first I was kind of embarrassed, but eventually it just became like it was part of my body. Because people would look at people who carried a Bible and say we were trying to hide behind it. But after that I started to say, “You know what? Even if I am, it’s the best thing to hide behind or hide myself in.”...[Because I had dropped, other members of the gang] were going to eliminate me...I was hiding like the rest of them. I was hiding from my affiliation...But people recognized me for who I was. People were like, “No, he’s been carrying his Bible for 2 years and 11 months. He’s been walking with his faith for that long now and we’re convinced that he’s going to do it.” – Tommy Iglesias

Sandra Pacheco is the only woman who expresses any reluctance to demonstrate her faith publicly.

I grabbed a friends’ Bible – she had it to roll cigarette papers with. And she says to me, “What are you going to do, become a jailhouse believer?” So, since I was sort of a ring-leader there, I had six or seven women following me, following me to chapel. None of them had Bibles. In the chapel, they started singing songs.
The words started to penetrate my heart. I said to myself, “This is not like Catholic church.” I could feel myself cry, but then I stopped because these girls were behind me. I couldn’t let them see me do that. One of the ladies from chapel later told me, she said, “I remember you would sit there with a stone hard face, waiting for us to say something false.” – Sandra Pacheco

Eventually, each of these participants got past his or her embarrassment and embraced the Christian faith fully and publicly. And, in fact, all of the participants moved past each of the obstacles they describe above. We will now look closer at the mechanisms that may be at play as individuals pay the price for faith and invest in their spiritual futures.

**Compensating for the Costs**

So far, we have used some rational choice propositions and ideas to help organize the testimony of participants into relatively discrete categories. Participants have revealed that there are both benefits and costs that accompany faith-group involvement in prison. Table 5 provides a simple summary of most of the rewards and difficulties that participants bring up throughout their discussions of their faith experiences in prison. Some of these benefits are covered in Chapter II, while others will come up in more detail in upcoming chapters.
### Table 5: Costs and Benefits Summarized

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Islam in prison</th>
<th>Christianity in prison</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits</strong></td>
<td><strong>Costs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Some hostility from staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s plan</td>
<td>Less preferential treatment from administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Restrictions on diet and dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washed clean</td>
<td>Prayer required five times a day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/new family</td>
<td>Being easily identifiable in and out of prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status among prisoners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Listing the costs and benefits this way, the great cost to male Christian inmates becomes clear. Both Muslims and Christians enjoy certain benefits, but the costs to Christian men present potential physically serious consequences. At this point it is difficult to determine to what extent these costs dissuade individuals from adopting either Christianity or Islam, but rational choice theory allows us to speculate that they do to some extent.

The real utility of borrowing from the rational choice perspective, though, comes as we try to see if these interviews can shed any light on findings from earlier studies. We can already see an alternative way of interpreting Byron Johnson’s curious finding that Prison Fellowship participants are more likely to have major infractions in their prison histories, but that finding was relatively incidental to his overall findings, which were confirmed by most of the literature reviewed earlier. Those findings can be summed up as follows: 1) that most prisoners do not become
involved in faith groups, 2) that those who do are not generally less inclined to break rules and laws, and 3) that a very small number of highly devoted religious participants show demonstrably lower recidivism rates and may indeed have experienced a significant change.

By dividing our data into the rational choice-informed categories of cost and benefit, we can construct a potential explanation for the first and third statements. Rational choice, along with other sociological work, tells us that under normal circumstances most people will not convert or reaffiliate. Prison, however, does not present normal circumstances. The prison was designed, in fact, to present the kind of circumstances that would provoke reflection and spiritual awakening. And the sadness, remorse, and even suicidal feelings our participants describe must be common enough responses to incarceration to make faith involvement very appealing for many prisoners. Then why aren’t more prisoners more involved? Well, as Table 5 and consistent participant statements (especially from male Christian inmates) show, faith involvement comes with a price. For many who are attracted to faith, the costliness may be enough of a deterrent to thwart their involvement, yielding low numbers of inmates who are seriously involved in their faith.

But some prisoners are not deterred, including the eighteen people whose stories are the heart of this study. While rational choice theory may not be able to tell us who will be deterred and who will not be, it can give us a small amount of insight into
what is going on when the costs do not outweigh the benefits of faith involvement in prison.

Aware of the challenges to both Christian and Muslim inmates, from other inmates and from prison staff, prison chaplains are compelled to provide religious inmates with some ideas as to how to deal with the adversity. Below is an excerpt from my field note observations of the Protestant service at CVP, where there was a scriptural acknowledgement of the challenges.

CVP Protestant service, Reverend Ruskin read from Hebrews 11:33-38: "...who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.” He described that God used these people who were mocked, beaten, imprisoned and tortured, to do the impossible. He said, “Diligent faith becomes the greatest when it faces the worst.” – Field Notes (3/23/03)

The message here is clear, that becoming more diligent in one’s faith is honorable in the face of religious persecution. Imam Mahmoud offers a similar message, that deeper commitment is the only appropriate response to maltreatment on the basis of faith.

The only thing a Muslim can do to overcome those images is to be a good Muslim. I have to let people know that Islam is about love. – Imam Mahmoud
So the recommended response to the hostility religious inmates may be subjected to is deeper investment.

There are, once again, some propositions from Stark and Finke's rational choice formula that might apply here. The kind of costs we have been discussing involve tension between faith groups and their surroundings. The following excerpts from Stark and Finke speak directly to that issue. Once again, it is not the intention here to prove the theory, but simply to find a way to understand the data. That said, Propositions 45, 46 and 47 seem to lend theoretical validity to Reverend Ruskin and Imam Mahmoud's advice.

**Proposition 45.** The higher its level of tension with its surroundings, the more expensive it is to belong to a religious group.

**Proposition 46.** The higher its level of tension with its surroundings, the more exclusive, extensive and expensive is the level of commitment required by a religious group.

**Proposition 47.** The higher a group's level of tension with its surroundings, the higher its average level of member commitment. (Stark and Finke 2000)(144-145)

Islam in America would be an expensive religion by this definition, and given the specific context of the prison, Christianity would also be seen here as an expensive religion, even though the forms of Christianity we are discussing here would not be considered terribly expensive in the outside world.

Looking at the responses that both Muslim and Christian ex-felons had to the challenges they faced while they were practicing their faith in prison, we see some consistent patterns, despite the difference in the nature of the two groups' challenges.
Namely, both Muslims and Christians understood the confrontations to their faith as tests of their commitment, where passing the test meant deepening commitment. As Stark and Finke explain, it's "elementary economics." They write:

Price is only one factor in any exchange; quality is the other, and combined they yield an estimate of value. Herein lies the secret of the strength of higher-tension religious groups: despite being expensive they offer greater value, indeed, they are able to do so partly because they are expensive. (Stark and Finke 2000:145)

Later, they continue:

To the extent that one is motivated by religious value, one must prefer a higher-priced supplier. Not only do more expensive religious groups offer a far more valuable product, but in doing so, they generate levels of commitment needed to maximize individual levels of confidence in the religion – in the truth of its fundamental doctrines, in the efficacy of its practices, and in the certainty of its otherworldly promises. (Stark and Finke 2000:146-147)

So, the costs of religion, especially expensive religion, discourages some, but may actually increase the sense of investment for those who meet the challenge.

**Rational Choice Analysis**

Before this chapter considered the costs of faith involvement, the previous chapter looked at the presence and influence of religious workers in the prison system, the emotional crises that beleaguer the prisoner, and the array of benefits that religious involvement provides. Until we began to direct our attention toward the difficulties associated with faith involvement in prison, all indicators pointed to religion as a practical and positive place for the inmate to turn. But the participants' statements from last section are a persuasive argument that the price for religious involvement can be dear. These statements also provide some understanding of how investment can deepen, in spite of, or conceivably because of the costs.
In the other sociological theories of religion, what Rodney Stark would call secularization theories (Stark 1997), there is little emphasis on answering the question, “Why don’t people convert?” Perhaps the trend toward secularization is assumed, and the question appears unimportant. But in the context of the prison, the question of why more prisoners do not convert begs to be asked. All of the theories recognize the role that crisis, upheaval, anomie, alienation, and despair play in religious choice. Given that 86% of Americans already have a religious identification (Kohut and Rogers 2002), the theoretical understanding of crisis would push analysts to imagine that most people in prison would turn rather automatically to religion. In fact, some do – a generous estimate is that between 32% and 49% of prisoners at some point will attend faith services during their incarceration (O’Connor, Ryan et al. 1996; O’Connor and Perreyclear 2002). We know from the studies on religion in prison presented in Chapter I, though, that it is a small minority of the inmate church attendees that make a substantial commitment. In both the 1996 O’Connor study, and the 1997 Johnson study, the percentage of inmates who participated in prison ministry programs that were considered to be high participation was about 11% (O’Connor, Ryan et al. 1996; Johnson, Larson et al. 1997). A simple calculation reveals that as few as 3.5%, or as many as 5.4% of prison inmates can be understood as having converted, using William James’s most simple definition of conversion, that religious ideas have taken a central place in their lives (James 1982:196-197). That leaves a minimum of 94% of prisoners not converting.
The tradition of rational choice theory in sociology is extensive (Blau 1964; Homans 1964; Coleman 1973; Homans 1974; Becker 1976), as are the debates as to its utility and accuracy (Chambliss 1969; Heath 1976; England 1989; Turner 1991; Bruce 1993; Neitz and Mueser 1997). To review the debate around rational choice in general is beyond the scope of this project, and is done effectively elsewhere (Scott 2000). We will simply concur that there are grounds for criticism. However, in the study of religion in prison a theory that offers some reasoning as to why individuals even in crisis do not convert is in order. By pushing the analysis in the direction of detecting costs as well as rewards, a rational choice approach offers just that, where other theories fall short.

Suffering from something of a secular bias, sociology has a propensity to present religious behavior as an unreasoned mechanism that clouds our own view of injustices. Marx, Weber and Berger help us to understand how religious beliefs and structures preserve an order that disadvantages many of the adherents themselves. Just as these were invaluable revelations at the time because they stood in contrast to an unquestioning acceptance of religious structures, the current rational choice movement in the sociology of religion offers a contrast to the secular bias that has dominated sociological analyses of religion. In this study, by seeing religious behavior as rational, and understanding religious choices in terms of costs and benefits, we have gained valuable insights into the religious behavior of convicted criminal offenders, both inside and out of prison. In the preceding pages it has helped us to understand: 1) that there are sometimes grave prices to pay for religious
membership in prison, which may deter many from involvement, 2) that these prices, once paid, may deepen a prisoner’s investment into the religious group, and it will soon help us see, 3) that the specific culture of women’s prison and fundamental differences in women’s socialization may make the cost-benefit analysis different for women, thereby affecting religious climate and behavior in women’s facilities as compared to men’s.

Before leaving the topic of rational choice theory, I should acknowledge again that the theory has been used in an unorthodox way in this chapter. Stark explicitly states that rational choice theory is a true theory, whose propositions should formulate hypotheses to test and prove (Stark 1997). This, however, has been an inductive study, only loosely structured around theory at its conception. Certainly the interview questions were informed in part by dimensions of the rational choice perspective, but they were never intended to test the theory. While some argue that propositional schemes and axiomatic theory are almost impossible to use properly (Turner 1991:12-13), the architects of the rational choice theory of religion would be justified in calling this study a misuse of their perspective. Nevertheless, as points in the theory have corresponded closely to observations from the field, rational choice has brought worthwhile insights into the study of religion and prison.

In this chapter, we covered data that offer some contrast to those presented in Chapter 2, where participants discussed the ways that prison culture was particularly conducive to the pursuit of faith. Here, in Chapter 3, they demonstrated that prison is
a unique setting where true involvement in Islamic and Christian faith groups can be costly and daunting. The decision to pay the price may deepen the religious inmate’s investment in the faith group, but it may also discourage many from commitment. Furthermore, the nature of the price exacted is very different, depending on the inmate’s faith. In the next chapter, we will look a little bit closer at each of these faiths in prison, considering the specific appeal of Islam and Christianity in the particular environment of the prison. We will also consider that prison experiences vis-à-vis religion vary not only according to faith affiliation, but that they may vary quite significantly along gender lines, as is suggested in some of the statements by Christian men in the last chapter.
Chapter IV: Variety and Religion in Prison

In this study, we have chosen to consider only the three religious groups that are most populous and formally recognized by the administration in the California prison system: Muslims, Non-denominational Christians, and Roman Catholics.

Admittedly, we do not begin to cover the wide variety of religious experiences in prison, but we at least offer a more varied picture than most previous studies do.

Many of the studies we have reviewed draw conclusions about religion in prison, but these conclusions are based on data collected entirely from Christian inmates in male prisons (Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Evans, Cullen et al. 1995; Johnson 1987; Clear et al. 1992; O’Connor, Ryan et al. 1996; Johnson, Larson et al. 1997; O’Connor and Perreyclear 2002). But, as we began to see in Chapter 3, “religion” in prison is not monolithic, and any conclusions should be based on data that appreciate the variety of religious experiences in prison. For instance, as we now know, Muslims experience challenges to participation that are very different from those experienced by the Christian men in our sample. In the following pages, we will look specifically at some historical and doctrinal dimensions of Islam, Non-denominational Christianity and Catholicism that correspond to the prison setting in noteworthy ways. We will also recognize that our data suggest a number of differences between men’s and women’s prisons on the matter of religion. Past studies have not spent much time on either of these more complex aspects of religion in prison, and while this chapter draws no definitive conclusions, it underscores the need for more research, especially as regards gender.
**The Importance of Doctrine**

Sociological theories of religion, especially the more recent ones, tend to emphasize affective bonds, social influence and social networks as the most important determinants of religious conversion (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow, Jr. et al. 1980; Snow and Phillips 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984; Machalek and Snow 1985; Stark and Finke 2000). In doing so, they de-emphasize the role of theology itself, and the possibility that the tenets and practices of a faith might actually be just as influential.

Snow and Machalek warn researchers that personal accounts of conversion experiences are subject to retrospective reconstruction and as such are “highly suspect as sources of data about the causes of conversion” (Snow and Machalek 1984:177). Stark and Finke write, “[C]onversion is seldom about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one’s religious behavior into alignment with that of one’s friends and family members” (Stark and Finke 2000:117). They continue in the same vein,

> [C]onverts very seldom are religious seekers, and conversion is seldom the culmination of a conscious search – most converts do not so much find a new faith as the new faith finds them...this point might well have been missed entirely [by social scientists], because when people retrospectively describe their conversions, they tend to put the stress on theology. (Stark and Finke 2000:122)

These admonitions are surely legitimate warnings, based on sound, thorough research. However, followed to the extreme, they could direct a researcher to dismiss statements their research subjects make about the causes of conversion, particularly if the statements are theological in nature. An interest in formulating creative and original research and theory should not pre-empt simple common-sense in how we conduct sociological inquiries. And common-sense still indicates that the tenets of a
faith might be a very influential cause of conversion, and that the religious convert might be a very good source of information on that topic.

That said, the following section will cover the ways that religious converts in our study respond to specific doctrinal and customary elements of the specific faiths we are considering. The data suggest that participants in this study embraced a new faith, or an old faith in a new way, because they found dimensions of it to be personally resonant. In social movement theory there is an idea that leaders of social movements generate support by using themes that are *culturally resonant* to the people they are recruiting (McAdam 1994). We now borrow from that idea to recognize that many participants made statements about elements of the faith they adopted to which they could, quite simply, *relate*.

**Bible Stories**

For Christians, particularly those who are encouraged to read and memorize the Bible, there are many stories and characters to which one could potentially relate. The lead character of the book is, of course, Jesus of Nazareth. We recall from Bill Roberts’s testimony in the introduction that hearing Peter betray Jesus brought the “Word alive,” because he felt he knew Peter and he had seen such betrayals in his life. But it was when his chaplain pointed out to him that Jesus had lived through a “dysfunctional childhood” that the “light became alive” to Bill and he began to look at the Bible in a different way, because there was something about Jesus that looked like him.
Other participants found pieces of Jesus that resonated with them, as well. Shane Johnston entered prison with a violent temper, and, earlier in Chapter II articulated the difficulty he had navigating the ferocity of the prison yard while maintaining his Christian principles. For him, a story in which Jesus shows himself not to be a “wimp” was instrumental in distancing himself from the wimpy reputation that Christians had in that prison. He recounts:

At the time my favorite story was Jesus with a whip cleaning out the temple. I loved that story, I did. I used to tell my friends, “Hey man, we don’t have to be punks. Jesus wasn’t a punk, look at this.” – Shane Johnston

Shane Johnston is not the only Christian prison convert to whom this story of Jesus’ temper resonates. Jeffrey Curtis uses this same Biblical story to lend perspective to an episode that happened after his release, when there had been a theft of the donations box at his church, and he lost his temper.

I don’t know if you remember the story, but Jesus got mad, too. Matter of fact, he fashioned a whip out of some cords and he ran some folks out of the temple once, so don’t tell me there isn’t a time for righteous anger. Let somebody try to steal from my church, I’ll show you righteous anger. He even cut off a soldier’s ear once. You better not mess with my church, my daddy’s house. – Jeffrey Curtis

Jesus’ willingness to raise his hand gave both of these former offenders an acceptable way to see their own aggression, and live with it. Both Shane Johnston and Jeffrey Curtis also reference another well-known Biblical story that pertains directly to their incarceration.

There’s a story in the Bible about Jonah in the belly of the whale. That’s what prison was for me, the belly of the whale. You say, well how does that correlate to prison? Well, they threw Jonah overboard in the middle of the sea. He couldn’t survive unless he was a heck of a swimmer. He could not have survived in all that water, all the turbulence in his life. So that when the whale swallowed
him with the big fish, it literally saved his life. Prison saved my life. It really saved my life. – Shane Johnston

In discussing his initiation into the Christian community in prison, Jeffrey Curtis says,

How can I say this? Back like the story of Jonah, they knew I would have to spend my time in the belly of the whale. – Jeffrey Curtis

In the story of Jonah, Jonah hears a command from God, but he is frightened and instead of heeding God, he leaves on a ship. God stirs up the ocean and everyone on the ship is in grave danger, determining that Jonah is the responsible party, having angered his god, the people on the ship throw him overboard. Jonah accepts his punishment, is immediately swallowed by a “great fish,” and becomes very repentant in the fish’s belly. After three days of penance, Jonah is expelled from the belly of the whale and given another chance to do God’s bidding. A character like Jonah, who committed a crime (disregarding God’s command), was convicted and sentenced by his peers (thrown overboard), spent his time imprisoned (three days in the belly), and was eventually forgiven and saved by God after he repented, is a clear archetype for the prisoner who finds religion. Identifying with him gives a prisoner a sense of hope and of his own capacity for redemption.

Another Biblical character with clear attraction for ex-felons is Paul. In this excerpt from my field notes, we see how a Bible study group at CVP discusses the selection of the 12th Apostle.

Now discussing the Book of Acts, Chapter 1, one inmate said, “What’s important to God is what’s in your heart.” To which another commented, “And that’s true
for us, too.” The inmates were discussing how the Apostles drew lots and chose Matthias to replace Judas as the 12th Apostle. “How often do we put God in a box? The lot fell on Matthias, but later we find that He chose Paul, the one who was out there killing the church.” And another inmate says, “The one who was more like us.” – (Field Notes 3/23/03)

Bill Jensen, PFM administrator and lay minister to prisoners also refers to Paul as he portrays the offender’s situation as not hopeless.

Most people think [of inmates] that ‘they had a chance in society, now they’re finished, let them stay over there, we’re not concerned about them.’ But those are God’s people also, and He loves them. You know you hear a lot of people say, ‘that guy went in prison and accepted God and now he thinks he’s going to heaven’ well, that can happen. And if they knew their Bible they could read and they could see what some of the Disciples did and they went to heaven. Paul was killing Christians until a certain point and he went to Heaven. – Bill Jensen

Finally, Nick McDonnell also mentions Paul as he discusses how his faith has taught him to be non-judgmental. Paul’s story, told in Acts, is that he was very much against the followers of Jesus and was guilty of imprisoning and killing them. But posthumously Jesus spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus and Paul was saved. He went on to be an instrumental force in the spread of the Word to gentiles. Paul became a new man – he even changed his name (from Saul) to represent this change. The parallel for inmates who are being born again in prison is clear. Paul is the quintessential sinner, murderer, forgiven and redeemed by Jesus.

The power of a Biblical story or character to which a prisoner can relate lies not only in the symbolic meaning it holds in the faith, but in the currency that the Bible holds as a cultural measure of morality in America. As Robert Bellah points out in his famous article originally published in 1967, America has a pervasive civil religion that is extremely referential to Biblical content and symbols (Bellah 1991). Finding
something in common with a character in the Bible is particularly meaningful, then, because of the Bible’s role in the specifically American construction of morality. Prison is a place for those who have been judged to have failed morally, so to discover that one is like someone in the Bible is to discover that one is not so bad after all, that his pains are universal, and his sins forgivable.

These Biblical stories are an important dimension of participants’ biographical accounts as they seem to have some redemptive power. Peter Stromberg sees it as even more than that. He studied the Christian conversion narrative in 1993 and found that quoting scripture is not only a common practice among the converted, but it serves a purpose in galvanizing the narrator’s faith. He writes,

> The central task of the believer in Evangelical Christianity is, through his or her interpretation of Scripture, to find a meaningful link between the symbol system (the Bible) and his or her experience. The conversion narrative is the creation of this link through language. (Stromberg 1993:6)

He emphasizes that language is not simply referential, but is constitutive. And ritual is the communication of canonical message into the present or immediate. It is through shifts in language, namely the conversion narrative, that self-transformation and increased commitment may occur. That is, “...as the canonical becomes constitutive, aspects of religious symbolism come to be real for believers. And as the metaphoric becomes referential, heretofore mysterious behaviors come to be replaced by religious convictions” (Stromberg 1993:14). Stromberg presents scriptural references in conversion narratives as instrumental and common among Christian converts. In our sample, ten of the Christian participants were from evangelical
orientations. Among them, five quoted scripture as they recounted their stories of discovering faith in prison. Of the two Catholic converts, one made Biblical references, but did not directly quote scripture.

Among the participants who quoted scripture is Jerome Ingles. Here he begins to touch on themes explored by students of Black Religion in the US, including the idea that within Christian doctrine are elements that relate to experiences of oppression (Raboteau 1984; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Morris 1996; Wilmore 1998).

[In the Book of John, it says] “Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden” – that means you’re working and you’re working for nothing. You need a break. The way out was to really accept the things I was ignoring. That may sound clichéd but, actually, the Gospels: Matthew, Luke Mark and John, are sources of energy for a lot of people, and they carry with them a history of a people just like us who had to deal with the problems of Roman domination. – Jerome Ingles

Jerome Ingles is not talking about radical political action. He is not even talking about race, but very simply about the similarity between the characters of the Bible and the individuals who exist in prison and out in this country, dealing daily with oppression, both self-created and externally imposed. He is, once again, drawing on an aspect of the faith that resonates, to which he can relate. Still, though, by mentioning the Bible and domination in the same sentence, he leads our discussion now to the connection between political activism and faith in the African American community.

*The Roots of Islam in Prison*

Gayraud Wilmore writes,
For most of its existence [Black Radicalism] has been an adjunct of Black Christianity because it was precisely through the Biblical story, the Negro Spiritual and the event of Christian worship that Black people knew the experience of being bound together in the persecuted family of a righteous God who destined them to break someday the bonds of oppression. (Wilmore 1998:230)

The form of Black Radicalism that concerns us here is not directly related to Christianity, but to Islam, or to something akin to Islam.

We have already mentioned the disproportionate number of Muslims in our prisons, most of whom are African American. The faith that they practice relies on the five pillars of Islam: faith, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage. It is orthodox in its practices and relies exclusively on Islamic canon for its structure. However, the prison popularity of this more orthodox form of Islam, Al-Islam, is owed in part to a much less orthodox form of Islam: the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam puts no emphasis on the five pillars and it relies as much if not more on the Bible and writings by Elijah Muhammad than it does on the Qur'an. In 1973, the Nation of Islam underwent a dramatic change when its leader, Elijah Muhammad, died and his son moved followers from a nationalist quasi-religious movement into a color-blind centuries-old religion. The Islam that is now practiced in the prisons is not concerned with race, but it is, nevertheless, predominantly comprised of black people. And many of the Muslim ex-felons who participated in this study were exposed to the Nation of Islam before they learned about orthodox Islam – in fact all three of the religious workers, and all but two of the ex-felons had had some involvement with the Nation of Islam.
As the following interview excerpts will demonstrate, for most Muslim study participants, the Nation of Islam paved the way for their eventual Islamic path. But there are exceptions; for Jameelah, it actually turned her off from Islam for a while.

I first went to prison in 1984. I was in Pleasanton, it was co-ed, men and women. I was 24...I was invited to *ju'mah* services on Friday, but I couldn’t conceive it. I couldn’t understand it. You know, I couldn’t even sit still in it. I was a practicing Christian at the time. I went to Sunday [Christian] services and all that, all that, I did that. When I was first introduced to Islam it was still the Nation of Islam, followers of Farrakhan. I didn’t understand that because they was telling me that God came in the form of Master Fard Muhammad, a man, you know, he told Elijah Muhammad that you know, all around based on Islam, just that black people and the white man was the devil, and I knew that just wasn’t right. I knew that just wasn’t right because God made all of us. He created all of us. No race, creed or color has a higher denomination than anything, any other race. So I knew that just wasn’t right. So I wasn’t interested in the Nation of Islam. That was my first contact with Islam. I didn’t know anything about orthodox Islam or any of that. All I knew was that Islam was for black people, and I didn’t want a part of that. – Jameelah Haddad

For Ali Hasan, his brief exposure to the Nation of Islam had some influence on his openness to orthodox Islam when he encountered it in prison.

[How and when did your involvement in your Islam begin?] Well of course we was in prison. I take that back. In our neighborhood in LA there was a gentleman. He had a business to sell candy. We had to be a bout 14 or 15. He was in the Nation of Islam. A friend of mine was working for him selling candy...I may have been twelve. He kind of had some influence, not a great amount. We sold candy for him, then it was “don’t eat pork” and this kind of stuff. So it started the thinking but I didn’t attend the meetings...Then I went to prison and there were some guys standing in the hallway with some Muslim journals, and they said, “Hey, we’d like to invite you to come to this meeting.” So I went. Some of the things that were being said attracted me. These were being a responsible human being, as a man and family life, and then, during my incarceration I was beginning to think anyway. – Ali Hasan

Rachid Abdullah’s path began with the Nation of Islam, and he was attracted to it because it was about “uplifting” black people. But when the movement changed, he
dropped out. Then he found himself in prison, spiritually “thirsty,” so he sought out Islam because of his experience in the Nation. The Islam that he chose, finally, was orthodox.

I was raised in a Southern Baptist home, however, I was never comfortable with it. I always felt that here was something else to be desired. I went through the motions, and really tried to get into it, but it never entered my heart. Then I learned about the Nation of Islam, in the 60’s. I was interested in it. It was different from anything I had ever heard before – picking up the people from the gutter. It was a way out. When Elijah Muhammad died, the son assumed the leadership of the community and he flipped to orthodox Islam, and he made the announcement that we hadn’t been practicing Islam... Many of us became disgruntled. Right away I began to think about the [Christian] church again. I was a musician for a lot of years. So I went back to playing music and having a lot of fun. It was also doing a lot of drugs, and I ended up in prison. That was OK, too. I never have anything bad to say about going to prison. I was so tired, and I was using so much to combat the fatigue. And I got busted – the best thing that happened to me... I played my horn the whole time I was over there. And I studied Islam. And that’s when I really got a chance to understand Islam. Spiritual enrichment. Kiss the world good bye... At the beginning of the transition [into prison], I didn’t do anything. But I had that need for spiritual enrichment, so I sought out the Muslims. A lot were straddling the fence between the old Nation of Islam, and orthodox Islam. Nation of Islam they talked about he Qur’an, they talked about God, but their focus was, well they said that the black man was God, and that the white man was the devil, and I understand that to some degree. I’ve come up with a definition for the Nation: I think they should say that they are a nationalist group that embraces some of the principles of Islam. I never got the spiritual enrichment from Nation of Islam. I began to read the Qur’an in prison and it was a cleaning process. I would justify crime when I was in the Nation. Now I was seeking a higher level of spiritual awareness. – Rachid Abdullah

Maryam Sabree has never been to prison in anything but a volunteer capacity. But her fist involvement with Islam was also through the Nation, which for her was a vehicle to true Islam.

I became interested in Islam in the seventies. I had moved here and it was right in the center of the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther party. And so some of my friends were becoming Muslim. I wasn’t quite sure what it was – I was in high school. In the seventies, I started practicing more of what the Nation of Islam wanted but not being a part of the Nation of Islam... how to eat, listening to and
reading a lot of the nationalistic philosophy. And then my cousin had left a lot of materials in our basement that dealt with Elijah Muhammad. So I started just practicing the little things I knew from that. Then I met a Muslim in the workplace and he kind of started filling in more things...He would talk to me and answer my questions...He was my mentor...The Nation of Islam was a vehicle, to go through to get where you need to go. The Nation of Islam was not true Islam. It's just more nationalistic. Louis Farrakhan came to Oakland and I went to a couple of his speeches. And the brother, my mentor kept telling me about Imam W. Deen Mohammed and his teachings and how he was the son of Elijah Muhammad and he was the inheritor. And the more he gave me information and the more I balanced it, I saw that [the Nation of Islam] was not really my direction. - Maryam Sabree

Sociologist Doug McAdam is discussing New Social Movements when he writes this, but the ideas can easily be applied to a religious movement such as Al-Islam.

Most new movements rest on the ideational and broader cultural base of ideologically similar past struggles...That these movements extended and modified existing activist traditions is undeniable. At the same time, it seems clear that they were initially rooted in the very traditions they subsequently transcended. (McAdam 1994:43)

Without the Nation of Islam, it is difficult to imagine that the orthodox form of Islam that is so popular in the American prisons would be flourishing as it is. It is a faith that does not discriminate, yet its new converts are to a tremendous degree, African American. Al-Islam promotes Islamic businesses that are economically independent of non-Islamic commerce, but other than that, it bears little doctrinal similarity to its predecessor the Nation of Islam. Still, it attracts African Americans more than any other ethnic group, and often those who commit to it were initially interested in the splashier Nation of Islam. Now, however, the Muslims who choose orthodox Islam see the Nation as something they have indeed “transcended.”
One of the reasons that they turn to orthodox Islam while in prison is that its presence is more dominant there. Rachid Abdullah talks about both groups being present in the prison, but the others say that once the change happened, the face of Islam in the prison changed as well. During my own prison visits, I saw very little evidence of the Nation of Islam. Maryam explains that the groups are divided, and that orthodox Islam is favored by prison administration.

There are both Nation of Islam and Al-Islam Muslims in the prison. When we first went in [to the prison] a lot of the people who were the Nation of Islam came out because it was Muslims, but they wanted themselves to be known that they were Nation of Islam. The group was more Al-Islam, but the brothers that were Nation of Islam wanted to be known as Nation of Islam. They made a presence known amongst us. And that was fine with me. But it wasn’t fine with everyone [among the Muslim volunteers]...We were there to facilitate the eid and various things, and they were discouraged by it...There are no Nation of Islam leaders that come into the prison to minister. Let me correct that: there are members of the Nation of Islam that do go in, but it’s not in the numbers that – it’s not in very large numbers. They’re not encouraged by the prison administration. – Maryam Sabree

Imam Mahmoud, who was himself a member of the Nation of Islam for many years, explains the difference. Just as Rachid says that the Nation appealed in its message of “picking up people from the gutter,” Imam Mahmoud understands that addressing oppression is one of the Nation’s more appealing aspects for many. In his view, “The Nation of Islam is diametrically opposed to Islam.”

The Nation of Islam is kind of a misnomer...the Nation of Islam is really a nationalistic movement that addressed racism in America for African Americans. The strategy of the Nation of Islam was to address white supremacy with black supremacy...but in Islam the view is any supremacy that you claim as a human being is wrong, that it says in the Qur’an that God is the only one who determines who is good and who is bad, and that the criterion or the standard for...what is better has to do with those who are more obedient to God, irrespective of their skin color...

The Nation of Islam has an appeal for someone who was born oppressed. You know, you’ve been told all your life you’re nothing, you have no value, and then
someone comes along and tells you you’re the king of the planet, you’re the crème, you’re the best, I mean that has an appeal. But you have to balance that with what is right, what God tells us, which is that it doesn’t matter what you look like, what matters is what you are as a human being, what kind of person are you, how you treat people. – Imam Mahmoud

Imam Mahmoud goes on to say that there are very few people from the Nation of Islam in the prison. He encounters more people who are “sympathizers” with the Nation, but not committed devotees. “I think there are a lot of African Americans who sympathize with the Nation of Islam but... don’t want to have that kind of discipline [to be strict adherents].” Finally, while he has clearly rejected his earlier beliefs and regards the Nation as being wrong on some counts, he also tries to take a diplomatic position. “Some people would say the Nation of Islam is outside of Islam, but I try not to take too harsh a view with them. If you’re going to try to help someone to change, you have to have a relationship with them.”

Many of the Muslims in the study were initially drawn to the Nation of Islam before coming to Al-Islam, for some because its message about overcoming oppression resonated. Which is to say, the cultural or personal resonance that the stories or rhetoric of a faith offer can be powerful to adherents. For the Christians, when they relate to a Bible story, they find an acceptable way to see themselves, one that is culturally recognized. For Muslims, whose practice is less focused on memorizing scripture, relating to the discussions of race in the Nation of Islam was enough to introduce them to a faith that would eventually turn those initially attractive concepts upside-down. It would also enter every dimension of their lives, from prayer five times a day to the way they walked, and what nail polish they wore.
Understanding now the ways that these resonant themes can be powerful to inmates who convert, perhaps we can gain some degree of insight into the patterns around Catholicism among prisoners and returning felons. We have already looked at the proportionate numbers of Catholics in the general population, in the federal prison system, and in the prison services that were observed. What we have yet to discuss is the incongruous number of referrals to this study from the Catholic group. Non-denominational Christians were referred at a ratio of 1:2, meaning that for every reverend or prison ministry worker interviewed, two former inmates were successfully referred. Muslims were also referred at a 1:2 ratio. Catholics, however, were referred at a 3:1 ratio – with every three religious workers interviewed, only one Catholic ex-felon was successfully referred (see Appendix 1 for a diagram of all contacts and by whom they were referred). Furthermore, three of the ex-felons who came through Catholic sources turned out not to identify as Catholic at all, but as Non-denominational Christian. This leaves a glaring question of what happens to Catholic inmates between chapel attendance and successful parole.

The scarcity of Catholic referrals suggests that Catholic and Protestant services were different in their long-term impact on inmates. It also confirms what the proportions of Muslims suggests: that the appeal of certain faiths may be greater or less in prison than in the general population. The Protestant faith that is most popular in prison is a specifically Non-denominational Christianity that emphasizes a personal relationship with God, and being saved or born-again. The Catholic church is certainly present in
terms of volunteers, prison chaplains and post-release support services, but it does not seem to create the enthusiasm that the Non-denominational Christian groups do.

The first possible reason is that this particular form of Protestant Christianity encourages individuals to read the Bible, something for which they have a lot of time, especially during lock-down times. The Catholic faith, by contrast, does not actually encourage independent reading of the Bible. Father Flannigan, a Catholic prison chaplain, says that the Bible is like “Organic Chemistry,” meaning that it is inaccessible and easily misunderstood. In the Catholic tradition, scripture is understood with the assistance of a trained intermediary, the priest. However, as Sister Mary, the Catholic chaplain at CVP points out (and Elaine Murray confirms), there is a shortage of priests in the prison ministry, leaving it a ministry of nuns and lay people. Without a directive to read the Bible on their own, and without ready access to an interpreter, Catholics in prison do not have the same resource of resonant stories.

Secondly, the style of the weekly services are very different. David Ringer, one of the two participants who converted to Catholicism, finds the calmness of the Catholic services appealing.

Catholic services are quiet. Silence was wonderful. Protestants had more singing...they were boisterous, which is great, but it just wasn't what I wanted at that particular point in time. – David Ringer

Observing the Protestant services, however, the draw that the more exuberant or “boisterous” service might have was clear.
The 9:00 am [CVP Protestant] service began at 9:05. The chaplain’s clerk had already begun speaking when the reverend walked down the aisle to the pulpit. He invited me to sit at the front of the chapel. I had a moment of regret, feeling I could observe more in the back of the room (not to mention make less of a spectacle of myself), but not wanting to disrespect the wishes of the chaplain, I stayed where I was. The chaplain’s clerk started it off by reading a passage from the Bible. He then reminded the assembled inmates that we need to “keep our hearts open” and made reference to “whatever brought us here [to prison].” He asked, “Is there anyone new to services today?” One man raised his hand and there was applause and some Halleluiahs. He then made some announcements about Bible study groups, classes, Parole Aftercare Placement, and Parole Recidivism Prevention programs and passed out sign-up forms. He promoted the classes and programs as a way to “help us be a blessing to our family, not violating the law.”...Reverend Ruskin began his address. He offered general thanks and praise to God then added “for the mess that you brought us through – thank you God,” and thanked Him for turning “mess-ups into miracles.” Then he had everyone stand up and clap. They clapped, many with their hands high in front of their faces, for a full minute or so. He instructed everyone to put his hand on the man in front of him and lift him up in prayer. The man to my left reached out to me and I held his hand. Reverend Ruskin called out, “The spirit of contempt is coming subject this morning!” (Field Notes 3/23/03)

What was striking about this service in contrast to the Catholic service, is that the fact that they were in prison was never forgotten. To the contrary, it contextualized the entire service. It was also far more interactive. In Catholic mass, there are two moments of interaction, the rite of peace, when the congregated offer each other a sign of Christ’s love, and Communion. In these Protestant services, the reverend asked the congregation questions; the inmates applauded; “Amens” were shouted out and clapping was common. And then the singing began. It continued through the entire service, which was over an hour. At the end of the service, the reverend had tears in his eyes, and declared that “something” had “broken” that day.

So, not only are the Protestant services and programs better staffed, with the aid of the intrepid prison ministry groups such as Prison Fellowship Ministries and Bill
Glass Ministries, they offer a style of worship that is celebratory and emotional, addressing the issues that prisoners are facing while they are in prison. Catholic mass at CVP differs very little from how it is conducted in any Catholic church on a Sunday morning, except for the frequent absence of a priest, and the omission of the rite of peace during RC services. In other words, Protestant services may be offering inmates a better product.

Again we turn again to rational choice theory for clues.

The association of religious rewards with tension rests upon differences in the conception of god and of otherworldly rewards...All exclusive religious organizations conceive of a dependable god of great scope and capable of providing otherworldly rewards. What differs is the vividness of these conceptions, the confidence generated in them, and the extent to which god is thought to be responsive. (Stark and Finke 2000’146)

On the question of responsiveness, once again the Non-denominational Christian chaplain and prison ministry groups emphasizes a relationship with Jesus Christ as one’s personal savior. This approach is almost required in order to welcome all different kinds of Protestants into the Sunday service and the group programs. And of course, if one has a personal relationship with his god, he is likely to see God as rather responsive.

The following four men were all raised in the Catholic faith, but turned away from the church to a personal relationship approach after going to prison. In prison Fernando Vega had a chance to read the Bible and look into religion, and he abandoned his Catholic faith there.
I would not call myself a Catholic; [I would call myself] a believer of God. After being incarcerated for so many years, you learn to read books. You learn to read religious [texts]. You learn to read [about] other religions, and other peoples’ religions. And you combine all those religions together and you realize something’s wrong with your own religion. So I took a good focus on my religion, which was Catholic at the time... When you read the Bible and you read it correctly, like in Genesis, John, Matthew, Revelations, and all that stuff. You read all that stuff and you realize that, “you know what?” You realize that that church that you believed in, it’s not what it is. So I just backed up from that. Because I believe in only one person, and that’s a spiritual God... God didn’t tell us to worship any kind of statues. When you walk into a Catholic church, that’s all you see. – Fernando Vega

Bill Roberts was also raised Catholic, but states his current faith identity very simply:

I don’t necessarily like the term Protestant... I just like to say “Jesus is my guy.” – Bill Roberts

Jose Arboles’s description is more elaborate, but puts the same emphasis on personal relationship.

It’s not even about a religion. It’s was a transformation. God was truly speaking to me. And pushing me in another direction, only because He knew where I needed to be... I [now] attend a Non-denominational church... The Roman Catholic faith is a great foundation, a great beginning, because it’s very structured... Just too structural for me, the Catholic service, the mass... seems to be too motionial: stand, sit, homily, this. The service just seems to be like a routine, as opposed to a personal thing. And it just never – my relationship as a Catholic, my relationship as a human being, my relationship as a Christian now and as a Christian then, didn’t have anything to do with the Catholic faith. I was already developing my own personal relationship [with God]... Forget the fairy tales, or you know, forget the little stories. Can you develop a relationship? And that truly what it was. And I can honestly say that once I started to see that, and it wasn’t so much from leaving the Catholic faith, it just allowed me to start to pull my blinders back a little bit more. I’m truly, the Catholic faith is just a little rigid still. Even after Vatican II, when they opened it up and they say the mass in English now, they took away the kneeling altar, the priest doesn’t stand with his back to you now, he talks to you this way. Obviously they’re starting to see, there’s something wrong with this now. Because you’ve got to have some type of relationship. You know, to [confess] your sins between a screen to some stranger who you know is Father Flannigan, you know, “Come on, let’s talk.” And I was already going down a road where I had a relationship going. And He kept responding. – Jose Arboles
For Tommy Iglesias, feelings that his Catholic upbringing was insufficient are closely tied with his feelings that his family was insufficient. Here he emphasizes how much more valuable a personal relationship with God is, while he decries his father.

I grew up as a Catholic... but I didn't really know what a church's function was at the time, I would just go out of tradition and out of family. I would go there and my mother would go there and as I grew up I started to see that my father would go there but he would put up a front. He was living a double life. I grew up in that way because my dad tried to tell us what to do, to do the right thing, but he wasn't living right. That kind of affected me by the simple fact that - when you're a parent, right? You're supposed to be giving direction to your sons or your daughters, what have you. You gotta make sure that you represent. Are you yourself containing those values? For a role-model, he wasn't a good father, and neither am I at this present day. Everything that I didn't want to be, I ended up being. It's funny how through generation - generations of people - if you're raised around bad counsel, you tend to be the same way. He was the one I relied on for leadership, you're constantly watching your parents... He was an alcoholic and did a lot of criminal things, and it's funny, out of curiosity I grew up just like him. I'm fortunate today by doing and by God being with me, you know? Through all my circumstances, I mean, God! The Bible says He will never forsake you. It's true. It's true... I can't blame, I can't go on blaming my father. And I can't say the Catholic Church was to blame. Because it's a personal relationship... I found out later, because I became a Christian, but I found out later after all this... I found out that when I was in the Catholic Church, right? Their teachings weren't sufficient. Their teachings weren't sufficient. Their baptism wasn't sufficient. Their spiritual presence of God wasn't in the church. It's not until now that the spiritual presence of God is in the Catholic churches – in some of them – it varies. Cause some of them are traditional. A lot of their teachings aren't even from the Bible. Some of them are just written by – they're ordained of men, not of God. God's word is infallible and yet man is fallible. – Tommy Iglesias

While this passage from Tommy Iglesias affirms theories affective bonds and faith association (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow, Jr. et al. 1980; Snow and Phillips 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984; Machalek and Snow 1985; Stark and Finke 2000), it also makes reference to direct Biblical teachings. Much of what these participants say suggests that Born-Again Christianity may be more successful in recruiting and
retaining enthusiastic prisoner participants because it does not require an intermediary (priest). Rather, it offers inmates a direct relationship with God, something particularly valuable because of the dearth of close, loving personal relationships in their lives. According to Larry Poston, Islam also promotes individual and direct worship through Qur'anic study and prayer, not requiring an intermediary for proper worship. Catholics see the Bible as complicated and difficult to decipher and, perhaps not just coincidentally, they have less success in recruitment and retention.

Whether it is Christians’ Bible stories, or the Nation of Islam’s theodicy of oppression, the content of a religious message is not irrelevant to religious choice. A sociological inquiry will, appropriately, focus on questions of religious structure to reveal patterns of behavior, but it should not do so to the exclusion of examining the content of religious doctrine.

So far this chapter has focused on religious doctrine and denominational preference to emphasize diversity as a factor in the sociological inquiry of religion in prison. In this chapter race has come up as a factor in the historical appeal of Islam in America, and in the high percentage of Latinos in Catholic service in prison (they were about 80% of the Catholic service at CVP). Race also came up in Chapter 3 as we discussed the multi-racial composition of Christian groups and the trouble it caused adherents on the yard. Beyond that, race has not dominated the data. Gender, however, emerges distinctly but somewhat enigmatically. When we looked at the comparisons in religious participation (in Table 3) we saw some figures across gender
showing, as expected, that women's participation surpasses men's both in and out of prison. But in this study we are not content simply to quantify participation. Rather, it is the aim of this study to consider how and why that participation happens. And, as we will see, male participants and female participants differ in relevant ways.

**Gender**

Consistent with patterns in the general population where women are traditionally more religious, the data from the 1997 Department of Justice survey of federal and state prisoners show women to be more involved in religious programs in prison (see Table 3). Expectations around gender and religiosity in prison are significantly complicated, however, by the findings of this study.

First of all, despite efforts to oversample women in order to have enough data for a robust gender comparison, the sample for this study finally ended up only 20% female. This looks like a proportionate sample, since men outnumber women at a ratio of 4:1 (Justice, Statistics et al. 2000). But if we consider participation in religious study groups to be a fairly good measure of "religious" the data show 41% of women to be religious in prison, as compared to only 31% of men. Taking that into consideration, the ratio of religious male prisoners to religious female prisoners is slightly smaller at 3:1. Even so, and even with my repeated requests of religious leaders that they refer women specifically, the number of women in the study remains low. While this is inconvenient for the purposes of comparison, it also may suggest important differences in male and female patterns of religious behavior in prison.
The earlier findings of this study have been that religion can be a mechanism that alleviates some of the pains of imprisonment, that practicing both Christianity and Islam comes with a price in prison, and that being able to relate to aspects of a faith’s doctrine may also affect choice. In the following section we will discuss how considering gender differences confounds each one of these findings. We will also look more closely at what “more religious” means, and how it is not a gender-neutral concept. Finally, we will suggest some possible explanations for the inconsistencies in the data, along with proposed directions for further research.

Confounding the Findings

Gresham Sykes, in his classic study of men in a maximum security prison, paints an ominous picture of a social system in which a man is never safe from threats to his physical well-being or to his “manhood” (Sykes 1958:63-83). The “argot roles” that are adopted to mitigate the pains of imprisonment comprise a social system in which aggression is key to survival. A prisoner’s ability to maintain a high level of aggression marks his masculinity which is necessary for prestige and respect (Sykes 1958:84-108).

Women are incarcerated at a much lower rate than men for violent offenses (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2003), and do not appear to demonstrate the same level of violence once behind bars (Owen 1998). According to Barbara Owen’s ethnographic study of women prisoners in California, the prison subculture in women’s prisons does not rely on aggression as the primary currency for status (Owen 1998:10). A woman may obtain high status through tough behavior, but she is just as likely to earn
respect through cultivating a reputation for fairness, or even through something like cooking her own food (Owen 1998:170-171, 106-107). As an officer from Owen’s book who worked at both men’s and women’s facilities commented, women in prison are not as likely to be “stuck in the chest” (Owen 1998:85).

Harry Dammer points out that some male inmates are attracted to religion for the protection it may afford (Dammer 1992; Dammer 2002). Many of the Christian men in our sample mention that they have been accused of “hiding behind their Bible,” a charge which they almost all deny. But even denying it, they imply that in religion, a male prisoner might find a refuge from the exacting demands of the prison code of aggression. Again and again, men in this study name the fear that they felt in prison, and the solace that the chapel brought when they were there. Without the same sort of violent threat, there is less of a need for protection, making women far less likely to turn to religion for this reason. Though the women in the sample were few, none made any reference to the violent prison culture as a factor in their faith lives in prison.

There are other “pains” in prison besides those presented by a violent culture, including feelings of abandonment and a tremendous lack of social supports. Again, these are dimensions on which men’s prisons and women’s prisons differ. In prison, women create fictive families and same-sex intimacies to compensate for isolation from the outside world and alienation of the world inside the prison walls (Pollock-Byrne 1990; Owen 1998). Where men rely on “inner strength,” perpetuating an
honor code of aggression and masculinity, women rely on close relationships to get through their time (Owen 1998:116-119).

In addition to creating family-like bonds inside the prison, women prisoners maintain strong relationships with family members who are still outside. Where men in prison are visited by women partners, women are visited by family (Owen 1998:129). Relationships with their children provide a bond for women prisoners with the outside world, which is not as often the case for male prisoners. In Owen’s study, almost 80% of the women prisoners had children, and in a study of women parolees by Patricia O’Brien, sixteen of the eighteen women had children (O’Brien 2001:100). In this study, O’Brien found that many women maintained close relationships with their mothers and other family members to ensure the continued care of their children (O’Brien 2001).

Much sociological research on religion reviewed earlier concludes that our social attachments are more influential in religious choice and conversion than even the message of the faith group itself (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow, Jr. et al. 1980; Snow and Phillips 1980; Stark, Doyle et al. 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984; Machalek and Snow 1985; Welch and Tittle 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1996). As we will see in detail in the following chapter, the men in the sample talked about being abandoned or having cut off their social ties on the outside world when they went to prison, and most made their conversions early on in a long sentence, then found a real community through their faith. In other words, a sense of abandonment may have left them freer
to entertain religious conversion. The family-like relationships in the faith group offer men social bonds that they otherwise lack in their lives. Since women maintain relationships with family members on the outside and find other kinds of social supports inside, they have more of what Stark and Finke describe as existing “social capital,” making religious conversion less likely, and other alternate sources of “social capital,” also making religious conversion less likely (Stark and Finke: 118-119).

The few women in our sample did “convert,” according to our operational definition here, that religious beliefs move to a central place in one’s life. These women may be exceptions to the patterns expected from Owen and O’Brien’s studies, in that they lacked the outside social attachments evidently common among female prisoners. Sandra Pacheco was not close to her family at the time of incarceration, she had no children, and her husband was in prison. Meredith’s husband abandoned her and remarried while she was in prison, she had no relationship with her parents, and she had lost touch with her children. Khadijah never lost touch with her son, but otherwise had few close social ties on the outside.

Furthermore, these women also had not involved themselves in the close family-like bonds discussed by Owen and Pollock-Bryne. Instead, as Khadijah and Meredith state below, they were not socially involved in prison.

[Before Islam, my social circles in prison were] non-existent. Too entrenched in trying to figure out what I had done with my life. Concerned with what the rest of my life was going to look like. I’m not real social anyway. – Khadijah
I didn’t fit in to very many [social groups in prison]. I was kind of an outcast. I wasn’t gay, so I didn’t fit into the girls that were into girls. And I wasn’t a lifer, which makes you an honorary member of the scrabble team. I was crafty but I didn’t know how to get supplies and things. I’ve always been basically an honest person, even though I’ve done these horrible crimes [laughs]...I wasn’t willing to steal from my job. And I also was a short-termer. I kind of I hung out with the ones that nobody wanted to hang out with, the girl that microwaved her baby and some other things like that. – Meredith Buchanan

Some theoretical perspectives argue that not having strong social ties before encountering a religious advocate makes an individual more open to the new faith (Rambo 1993; Stark and Finke 2000). In prison, having social networks that already provide family-like relationships may make an individual less reliant upon the potential social rewards of religion. This reasoning points toward a hypothesis that women will be less likely to change their religious orientation in prison than men will be. This is a topic for which there are no existing studies or reliable data. But the idea that women are more relational than men is by now well-recognized in the social sciences (Gilligan 1982), and combined with the consensus that social networks are key to religious choice and change, there is a strong argument that there should be more research on this topic.

Also key to our discussion of gender are the grave costs described by male participants who adopted Christianity while in prison. We found that the tense environment of men’s prisons, dominated by tests of toughness and racial divisiveness, led to serious and even physically dangerous difficulties for Christian inmates. But women’s prisons are not characterized by the same competitive
masculine culture that the men in our study depict. Avoiding a label of “wimp”
would, presumably, not present the same kind of challenge for female Christian
inmates as it apparently does for male Christians. This so called “cost” for faith
involvement that we discussed earlier would simply not apply to women.

Similarly, according to the literature, women in prison experience little pressure to
stay with same-race groups (Pollock-Byrne 1990; Owen 1998). Barbara Owen writes:

At CCWF, race and ethnic issues form a subtext that mediates relations among the
women and between the workers, but is not a primary element of prison social
organization. Race and ethnicity, then, form one aspect of prison identity and
social interaction, playing some role in the formation of prison culture. Unlike
male prisons, where race is the primary basis for prison social order, race and
ethnicity play a somewhat different role...most of the women interviewed at
CCWF claimed that race had little bearing on their day-to-day activities.(Owen
1998:152)

She also quotes an officer who says that race is not a “big thing” (Owen 1998:85),
and points out that prison fictive families are often interracial (Owen 1998:151). In
men’s prisons, however, as evidenced by the data presented above, and supported by
studies of men’s prison life (Jacobs 1977; McKelvey 1977), racial tension pervades.

The terrible price that Christian men have to pay for involvement in their faith group
includes coercion and violence from other members of their race, pressuring them not
to be disloyal. This is a price, presumably, that few women of any faith in prison
would have to face, and, consistent with this expectation, none of the women in the
sample make any mention of race-based pressure. The dissuasive power, or “costs”
then, that the divisive race culture has on men’s religious choices might not come into

162
play at all in women's prisons. Equally, since there are also fewer pressures to be seen as tough, the general threat to Christians as "wimps" must also be absent in women's prisons, again lessening the cost of involvement for women compared to men. By the same token, though, the increased investment that we expect to result from the price of involvement might also be missing among religious women in prison, making any hypotheses around cost and investment vis-à-vis prison religion very different once gender is included.

The costs associated with Islam, according to our data, are not usually exacted by fellow prisoners, but by prison authorities, both staff and administration. There is some evidence that men and women in prison hold different attitudes toward authority and programming. Owen found, comparing her experiences researching men and women, that approaching women in prison was easier, because men don't want to be associated with someone who could be construed as "authority." In her experience, men in prison show an almost total distrust of authority, which is not the case for women (Owen 1998:31). For example, a woman who is close to the staff or administration is said to have "juice" (Owen 1998:170); this is very different from Sykes's "centerman" who would be disdained by other prisoners for such associations (Sykes 1958:87-90). Similarly, the dilemma that the prisoner in Sykes's study suffered, being punished by fellow prisoners when his work was rewarded by staff (Sykes 1958:29), seems completely absent from the experience of the women featured in Owen's book. In fact, among women, work provides self-worth and unexpected respect between inmates and staff (Owen 1998:98). The overall
impression the reader is left with is that the women in Owen's study responded remarkably well to the incentives provided by earning "good time" and by the possibility of "losing time." This stands in stark contrast to Sykes's description that the extrinsic rewards of prison work (i.e., "work time" and "good time") are too meager and/or too distant to be effective incentives to disciplined behavior, precisely because of the hostile attitude male prisoners have toward prison authority (Sykes 1958:28-30).

While there is no evidence that female Muslims are harassed by prison authority to a lesser degree than male inmates, this difference in attitude toward prison authority might conceivably cause them to respond differently. A different attitude toward authority could bear out as a difference in perceived cost of involvement, and consequently, as a difference in investment, although at this point it would be difficult to even hypothesize as to how that would look across gender.

Along with the potential gender differences in the costs of religious involvement in prison, there may be differences in the functions that religion serves to male and female prisoners. As we will discover in upcoming chapters, forgiveness is a key concept in our analysis. Opportunities for forgiveness through faith are very valuable to study participants, a finding that may lend some wisdom to future prison policy. In this discussion we draw heavily from John Braithwaite's work on reintegrative shaming, where forgiveness holds a prominent role. There is reason to speculate that there may be gender differences in this as well. Lois Presser studied violent male
offenders and found them to be rather reticent to express any remorse for their crimes. Rather, they minimized their responsibility, focusing on their own victimization and providing “accounts” or excuses for their crimes. In her findings, men were unlikely to seek forgiveness because they were unwilling to admit wrongdoing (Presser 2003). In a very contrasting finding, Gaarder and Belknap found in a study of female juveniles waived to adult court that girls tend to maximize their own responsibility in the crimes in which they are involved (Gaarder and Belknap 2002). The religious men in our study, understanding themselves to be forgiven or “forgivable,” defy Presser’s finding, offering remorseful statements and accepting their accountability. A systematic gender comparison might find women offenders, whether religious or not, to be more likely to express remorse in general than their male counterparts. And if this is true, then perhaps women have other (internal or communal?) means for remorse (and therefore for reintegrative shaming and forgiveness), where men might only have religion. Clearly, this is not a conclusive finding, but it is relevant conjecture that potentially complicates the findings of this study and could have important implications for the direction of research and policy.

Another obvious gender difference to consider is the higher degree of religious participation among women in the non-incarcerated population. If women are more involved in religious institutions in general, then women entering prison are more likely than men entering prison to have extant faith involvement. Rambo says that where religion already has a strong-hold, and where religious organization already exists, fewer conversions will take place (Rambo 1993:47). Stark and Finke say
basically the same thing, that the more religious capital they have, the less likely people are to reaffiliate or convert (Stark and Finke 2000:121). So, women might be less likely than men to have a conversion experience in prison, that radical change in spirituality where faith moves from the periphery right to the center of one’s life. It doesn’t mean that they will be less likely to have rich spiritual involvement in prison, just that they might experience less revolutionary spiritual change in their lives.

A final finding that must be applied differently is around religion’s personal resonance. Earlier in this chapter we discussed how Biblical stories give adherents, and specifically prisoners, characters and situations to which they can relate, making the faith more inviting. We should now acknowledge the obvious fact that almost all of the characters in the Bible are male, and if “relatability” is actually a powerful element in Christianity’s draw, it could not be expected to have the same impact on women. Would a woman in prison identify as directly with Jonah in the belly of the whale or Paul the killer of Christians redeemed on the road to Damascus? Perhaps she might relate to Mary Magdalene’s path of redemption, but she is one character in two-thousand pages of text. Stromberg’s notion that recitations of scripture in a conversion narrative are constitutive should be applied and tested across gender to see if it is equally true for women, for whom scripture might be more remote.

Women’s prisons and men’s prisons are different; over that there is little debate. Among these differences is that the climate of a men’s prison is more violent and racially divided, and while women’s prisons are not happy places, there are more
social supports there as compared to men’s. Women in prison also tend to maintain outside contacts with family more than men, and appear to have alternative mechanisms for expressing remorse and perhaps even experiencing forgiveness. These differences point to the possibility that women in prison might turn to religion for different reasons than men do. Women are also, generally speaking, more likely to be more involved in their churches, making them perhaps less likely to convert in prison. And practicing faith in prison might be a less costly proposition for women, or at least the costs might be different, potentially giving women a very different cost-benefit analysis for making religious choices in prison. Finally, certain religious themes may resonate more for men than women, or they may not. But the fact that there are more characters and storylines that are masculine in both the Bible and Islamic texts brings up an important thought: that religion, though practiced by both men and women, is not gender-neutral.

Not Gender-Neutral

Research consistently finds women to be more involved in their faith than men, at least in Christian faiths (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Thompson 1991; Miller and Hoffman 1995; Wiseman 2002). But explanations for this vary widely. Bellah and colleagues reflect Toqueville’s observations of 19th Century America, pointing out that women have historically had a more family-oriented role and that it is in this family domain where worship and moral indoctrination take place (Bellah, Madsen et al. 1985:85-90). Lincoln and Mamiya’s analysis of their finding, that rates of participation in black churches are more disparate across gender in urban areas than in rural areas, relies on this same distinction between “women’s sphere” and “men’s
Thompson takes a different approach, measuring masculine and feminine outlooks as opposed to simple sex distinctions, and finding that it is a feminine outlook more than being a woman that is associated with greater religiosity (Thompson 1991). Miller and Hoffman believe that religious commitment is inversely related to risk-taking behavior, postulating that it is riskier to live without faith than with it, and having faith requires relatively low investment for potentially eternal rewards. They propose that women are more religious because they are less inclined to take risks (Miller and Hoffman 1995). Wiseman proposes that the churches provide roles that are more suited to women, thereby differentially attracting women to deeper church involvement (Wisenman 2002b).

Each of these explanations surely has its merits. But one thing missing from all of these analyses is the idea, implied in the section above, that religion might serve different purposes or functions for men and women. While all of these studies have been primarily concerned with explanations for why women participate more in religious activity, they have not really considered the possibility that faith is different for men and women. This line of thinking directs us toward the possibility that men and women might approach faith differently, especially in the prison context, where men and women are separated from the family (discounting the utility of the "sphere" perspective), and where everyone concerned is likely to have committed a crime (interfering with the applicability of the risk hypothesis's chief assumption, that women take fewer risks).
In this study, an interesting pattern emerges from the testimony of several participants that indicates one way that religious approach might vary according to gender. A number of the men who devoted themselves to Christ while in prison described having a dialogue with God early on in their incarceration. In this dialogue, they expressed their anger, frustration and mistrust of God; they bargained with Him, addressed Him personally and sometimes confrontationally. Below are some examples of this:

- If you’re really there, you better show yourself and soon. – Bill Roberts
- I wasn’t angry with God, I just didn’t have anything to do with him. – Dan Tucker
- God, you really screwed me. – David Ringer
- I told Him, I asked Him, that if He got me back home to my family, that I would serve Him whole-heartedly for the rest of my life. – Jose Arboles
- All right, God, are you going to get me through this minute? Because I’m not sure I can. – Nick McDonnell
- You know what God, I’m so miserable. I don’t even believe you exist. But if you do exist, I really need you to help me. – Shane Johnston

With so few Christian women in the sample, it is not possible to make any conclusive statement about gender and the direct manner with which these men address God. It may be that confronting God is a specifically masculine approach to faith, and that this would make a “personal relationship” approach very appealing to men. It is also possible that women who find themselves in prison and begin to seek a relationship with God also use confrontational language, but that I missed it for not having spoken with enough women. Either way, it reminds us that in any sociological inquiry, subjects have a gender, and that gender often has an impact on how they interact with the topic, be it crime, family, politics or religion.
Keeping in mind that over 80% of Americans identify as some sort of Christian, all of the conclusions that women are more religious in America have been heavily biased toward that demographic. Considering women and Islam, findings might differ. Women are supposedly more attracted to high-investment faiths (Stark and Finke 2000:198). Islam is considered to be higher investment insofar as dress, diet, and lifestyle are affected profoundly. There might, then, be an expectation that women are drawn to Islam. Studies find, however, that this is not necessarily the case here in the West. Larry Poston examined the conversion testimonies of Muslim converts in Europe and the US and found male converts outnumber female converts by three to one. He writes, “These statistics indicate that men are attracted to Islam at least as much and perhaps more than women” (Poston 1992:163). He offers some explanation:

Although this religion upholds a theoretical equality between male and female, traditionally it has been characterized by male orientation and domination... The media presentation of the Muslim woman as veiled, secluded, uneducated, and little more than a material possession of the male finds little to commend it in the eyes of the contemporary Western woman, and although traditional Eastern standards of dress and social interaction are not as a rule enforced in Western contexts, the stereotypes regarding female subjugation to the male have exercised a wide influence, which has perhaps contributed to the relatively low proportion of female converts. (Poston 1992:163-164)

Among Poston’s American subjects, the gender distribution was not nearly as uneven as it was among Europeans, but data from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) confirm that more men than women in America may be converting to Islam. The ARIS data from 2001 show African American Muslims (most of whom have converted) to be 73% male, and only 27% female (Kosmin and Mayer 2001).
Whether Poston’s theory is correct, that media depictions serve to deter American women from Islam is unknown, but the comments below from Muslim prison workers provide evidence that da’wah in women’s prisons involves an effort to counter negative images of Islam in the West.

Below Maryam Sabree discusses the division between men and women in Islam. In fact, Islam makes more of an issue, for better or worse, of gender than do the other two faiths in the study. The distinction in Islam may be off-putting to a Western woman, as it was initially for Maryam.

You got to remember in Islam there are different etiquettes for the practice...There are some communities in Islam where men are here and the women are here. And there are, more in the African American communities where they more mix and mingle...I found that more foreign communities are more separate. The men and women are separate. The men are over here and they’re learning. And it is a part of the deen, because the man is the head of the family, so they are the ones that need the knowledge to pass to their children and their wives. But the wife has a responsibility for herself, as well. So there are separations. So if we’re in this room and there are men and women, the men would be there and there would be a partition and we wouldn’t see them. And at one time, when I first got into Islam, I thought that that was like, oh my goodness, what’s this all about? But now I find myself personally through the experiencing of it, it’s freer. Because you can be more, a little bit more relaxed, you know?

Maryam goes on to describe how this translates to her da'wah with the women in prison.

My thing that I discuss with sisters is, “You’re gonna be, go from facility to facility whenever they decide they want to transfer you or go home,” and my goal was for them to learn Islam as it should be learned as it relates to them as women. So that if [they] come across or what to marry a brother and he wants to say, “No, it’s supposed to be like this, it’s supposed to be like that,” she has to know her edat – she has to know her way of Islam and what is incumbent upon her. So we have a book Women in Shar’iah (Islamic law) [by Abdu Rahmani, Doi] that we have been reading. I tell them that the Muslim woman needs to know what is incumbent upon her through the Islamic law. And the Islamic law is called the Shar’iah. This is the Shar’iah as it relates to women and these things that are in
there as far as women is concerned. So I discuss with them. I told that it’s incumbent upon them so we’re reading that. – Maryam Sabree

In describing Islam, Maryam emphasizes the positive ways that Islam represents women.

What appeals about Islam is its true nature. It’s about balance. I like the prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and how he just, people portray him that, because women are following their customs, they think everything is Islam. He was more a freer of women and a balancer of women, so that women weren’t being truly abused in the manner in which they were. You know, baby girls were being buried, because they were more towards having boys. And you find that in Chinese culture, too. But in Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, when the message was revealed, they stopped doing that. Girl babies are a value, too. So, that kind of appealed to me. A lot of other things. It’s a family-oriented community where family is very important and highly revered. – Maryam Sabree

Imam Mahmoud echoes Maryam’s statements as he describes the value that Islam places on women.

Before Islam, the Arabs were “completely backwards...the only thing they recognized was the rule of tribes, pretty much like a gang kind of street mentality...and he [Muhammad] totally changed the psychology of the Arabs. He encouraged them to help the weak and help the poor, he definitely changed their view of women...[Before Islam] the Arabs considered women to be like property, they had no rights, female babies were buried in the desert.” Before Islam, he continued to explain, women could not divorce their husbands. Islam established the right for a woman to choose whether or not she would marry someone.

After describing the historical significance of Islam vis-à-vis women, Imam Mahmoud discusses its personal significance.

It wasn’t until I came to Islam that I really got an appreciation for the role of women...The mercy of God comes from the women. Women are really the mercy of God. I mean, you are. You are, women, all women. And the role of men is to protect and to assist that role of being the mercy of God, to help women to do that. To help women to raise the children, because the education of the children is coming from women. [The first teacher of every child is going to be a woman]. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy of God be upon him, said that paradise, heaven actually, lies at the feet of women, of mothers. And that if the world is going to change, that it has to begin with women, with the treatment of women. If women don’t get treated better, if women don’t get rights, if women
don’t get recognition and respect, the world is going to continue to go down into this abyss. The strange thing for me is that when I talk to American women, American women think that Muslim women are oppressed, you know, they gotta cover, they wear this covering. Somehow they equate freedom with having less clothes on. And for Muslim women, they see it completely opposite. They see it as the covering actually gives them more freedom. Because what it does, it makes men relate to women differently. Men have to relate to Muslim women differently than how they relate to other women because they can’t relate to her based on how she looks. They have to relate to her from here [points to his head] because they can’t see the physical. And that’s the purpose of that covering… The real understanding of Islam is that women have more of a valuable role in society than men do in a lot of ways. – Imam Mahmoud

Despite these efforts on the part of da’wah workers to emphasize how Islam values women, there is some evidence that women are indeed less attracted to Islam in prison than are men. In the only published journal article specifically about women inmates and Islam, Felicia Dix-Richardson posits that women’s lack of familiarity (or actual negative impressions) of Islam may combine with their pre-existing involvement in Christian churches and a lower degree of racial tension in prison to dissuade them from Muslim conversion (Dix-Richardson 2002). She compares the more common phenomenon of Muslim conversion in men’s prisons with her own finding of only 30 Muslim women in the entire Florida state prison system. The federal figures she cites from 1995 show that Muslim men are just over twice as common, proportionately, in prison than are Muslim women, representing 6.4% and 2.7% of their respective prison populations. And given the ratio of male to female prisoners in the country, this translates into a far lower number of actual female Muslims in prison.
Maryam Sabree supports the idea that Islam flourishes in men's prisons more than in women's.

The men respond a lot more stronger. They're more challenging because they study more. They read more, they study more. They're active Muslims in their incarcerated environment. Some have their own imams or their emirs in their own environment. And they're teaching in their environment as well, what they know. I don't find that as much in the women's facility. I don't know why... The brothers, they are very much more appreciative in the fact that they may send cards of appreciation to the group.

And, as Maryam perceives it, the gender difference in enthusiasm continues after release from prison.

I've seen quite a few brothers, more so than sisters [come out of prison as strong Muslims], and it's not to say that it doesn't happen with sisters, but I don't know a whole lot of them that it did. I know about five or six sisters that were incarcerated at some points in their lives to come out, and be active in the community and find their own jobs that they wanted to do, married, family have kids - to be able to do that. I find that brothers do that, too. – Maryam Sabree

Perhaps Dix-Richardson's and Maryam Sabree's observations reflect a general pattern of women prisoners being less inclined to convert than men, and perhaps this is due to stereotypical images of Islam in the West, or to their higher rates of (non-Islamic) faith involvement prior to incarceration. The fact that this is simple speculation points to the serious shortage of research on the subject.

Using Table 5 from Chapter 3 that tracks the costs and benefits of both Christian and Muslim membership in prison, Table 6 adds the gender differences discussed above. Grey boxes signify factors that may differ significantly for female prisoners, graphically demonstrating the differences from Table 5. Note that a new row has been added to include the rigid gender roles in Islam, and that it appears as both a potential cost and a potential benefit.
Table 6: Considering Gender in the Cost/Benefit Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Islam in prison</th>
<th>Costs</th>
<th>Christianity in prison</th>
<th>Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Some hostility from staff</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Much hostility from other (male) prisoners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s plan</td>
<td>Less preferential treatment from administration</td>
<td>God’s plan</td>
<td>Pressure and threats from same-race (male) groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Restrictions on diet and dress</td>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Challenges to sincerity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washed clean</td>
<td>Prayer required five times a day</td>
<td>Born again</td>
<td>Embarrassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/new family</td>
<td>Being easily identifiable in and out of prison</td>
<td>Community/new family</td>
<td>Being easily identified in prison but not outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status among prisoners</td>
<td>Status among other Christians in prison</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More defined gender roles</td>
<td>More defined gender roles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preceding breakdown of potential gender differences in the factors associated with religious choice in prison is not meant to imply that religion is less powerful for women prisoners than it is for men prisoners. Rather, it is meant to undermine the universality of theory that is formulated based only on men’s experiences. Women are more religious in society and in prison, measured conventionally through church and religious program attendance. But because they are such a small minority of prisoners (albeit rapidly growing (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2003)), their religious behavior, choices and transitions in the prison context have not been investigated adequately by any study, including this one. What this study does attempt to do is to make some general observations about religion and male prisoners and to examine the gendered assumptions of those observations, suggesting that further research include some self-consciousness of gender bias. Without doing this, research on the religiosity of female inmates might simply consider women’s participation in
religious programs in prison to be higher for the same reasons that women’s religious participation is higher in general, or it might consider women inmates’ religious participation to be motivated and enacted in the same ways that men’s is. Both of these approaches would yield flat and potentially inaccurate analyses.

Other differences in gender and religion in prison that go beyond the scope of this analysis but warrant mention for future directions are sentence length and criminal history, including questions of violence and drug use. Since this is a qualitative analysis, and the quantitative data on religious involvement among prisoners are very limited, the study does not attempt to consider variables such as drug addiction, violent criminal history or sentence length as they pertain to religious commitment. These are clearly worthwhile areas for inquiry, though, and should surely be investigated further. When that occurs, a gender comparison would be merited, since there are such differences across gender along these variables. Women are more likely to be in prison for drug offenses, and men are more likely to be in prison for violent offenses (Owen 1998; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2003). Women are more often imprisoned on first offenses (Owen 1998; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2003), for shorter sentences, and for less serious crimes (Tonry 1996:56-57). Furthermore, women’s rate of incarceration is increasing much faster than men’s (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2003), meaning that conditions in women’s prisons are also changing rapidly, making studies about the culture of women’s prisons particularly timely.
In this chapter, we have begun to demonstrate that religion in prison is not uniform—it varies in appeal according to its doctrinal messages, and it may look very different in men’s and women’s prisons. Rather than drawing conclusions, this research suggests ways of looking at the subject of religion in prison, and points out that research on religion in prison should consider the nature and tenets of the faith, rather than operationalizing this complicated and emotionally-charged phenomenon of prison faith conversion simply by quantifying attendance. As demonstrated lucidly by participants, specific elements of Islam and Christianity are particularly relevant to them in the prison setting, and any analysis that does not consider these motivations for involvement flattens the rich texture of the topic and potentially misses important information. Participant statements also make it clear that conclusions drawn about faith in prison must take gender into consideration. Neither religion nor prison life are the same for men and women, and so things like race-based threats against Christian inmates or the role of affective bonds in prison faith conversion cannot be assessed for one gender and generalized to both, a mistake that could easily be made if the body of research is not expanded.

This chapter meant to raise questions of gender and religious content to consider patterns of religious choice that were observed among study participants. More as a way to look critically at past and current research on religion in prison, the preceding analysis did not rely much on the theories reviewed earlier. In the next chapter, we will use existing theories to look at the functions that faith serves for prisoners (male
and female, Christian and Muslim), while they are incarcerated, and as they prepare to return to society.
Chapter V: The Functions of Faith in Prison

We begin now to address our second research question: Why does it matter how and why prisoners find faith? We could settle without too much contemplation on the assumption that transformation will happen within the prison walls, and that the most natural and anticipated form of transformation is tied to religious renewal, making the study of religious renewal in prison equally natural and anticipated. But, as past research has shown, and as basic recidivism figures confirm, this transformation assumption is flawed.

The majority of convicted felons will re-offend, and a smaller majority will actually return to prison (Petersilia 2003). Given the frequency with which ex-felons re-offend, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the prison system is a failure in its function, “supposed or demanded, as an apparatus for transforming individuals” (Foucault 1979:233). But prisons persist, despite this failure. As Michel Foucault puts it, “We are aware of all the inconveniences of prison, and that it is dangerous when it is not useless. And yet one cannot ‘see’ how to replace it. It is the detestable solution, which one seems unable to do without” (Foucault 1979:232). Written in 1975, Foucault’s observation was never more true than today.

So the prison system continues to grow in spite of the fact that does not transform its inhabitants. But there are the rare, exceptional individuals who step outside the prison gate not only reformed, but explicitly attributing the change in their lives to the experience of prison. And, as the historical portion of the literature review discusses,
the notion of moral transformation is essential to the assumptions upon which our ever-expanding correctional system is based. So studying how and why prisoners find faith matters because understanding the moral path of those few felons who specifically say they have had a moral transformation may provide some insight into those rarely-examined assumptions.

But before we even discuss the conceptual value of investigating unexamined assumptions around transformation, we should consider the practical value that this study may offer. Remembering that about 93% of the people currently in prison will eventually leave (Petersilia 2003), the possibility of knowing what changes take place among that minority who actually do manage not to go back to prison stands out as quite valuable. Here we will draw from existing theory to look closely at participants’ statements about what happened to them while they were practicing faith in prison.

One of the aspects we will consider is the importance of the close personal relationships participants found in their faith groups. These data echo the *moral communities hypothesis*, which posits that the moral influence of a supportive faith community is key to moral resolve and law abidance (Stark, Doyle et al. 1980; Welch and Tittle 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1996). Understanding the role of these supports can be useful as we try to extract applicable lessons from the study.
We also look at participants’ statements about the value of forgiveness and rebirth in their prison faith. These statements bring aspects of John Braithwaite’s theory of reintegrative shaming to life. For most inmates, the prison experience does not offer chances for reintegrative shaming or decertification as a deviant. For inmates who become involved in Islam and Christianity, though, it does. And according to Braithwaite, decertification as a deviant is essential to successful reintegration (Braithwaite 1989), meaning that the ritualized forgiveness that these former inmates experience in their supportive faith community may constitute one of the more important and practical findings of this study.

Now we begin to tackle the elusive concept of transformation. Study participants found their religious experiences in prison to be reintegrative and transformative, but, apart from their own declarations, we don’t have any reliable ways to measure transformation. One thing we can note are the ways that participants discuss changes in their value systems. And among these changes, what stands out prominently is a new attitude of altruism and service. This is a remarkable finding because the new attitude stands in such contrast to the attitudes participants feel brought them to prison in the first place, and because it appears to keep them afloat in their new crime-free lives. It may even suggest a way to operationalize transformation.

**Moral Community**

Not all of the research finds religion to be inversely related to criminal deviance, but, significantly, some finds that involvement in a religious community may result in law-abidance and social control (Stark, Doyle et al. 1980; Welch and Tittle 1991; Evans,
Cullen et al. 1995; Stark and Bainbridge 1996). Research in the 1980’s revived Durkheim’s term “moral community” conceptualizing religion as a primarily a “group property,” rather than simply an individual experience (Stark, Doyle et al. 1980; Stark and Bainbridge 1996:72). With a view toward its social properties, Stark and Bainbridge found religious membership (mostly Christian) to be positively correlated to social integration (Stark and Bainbridge 1996). Here the idea was not that an individual’s belief in God, sin, or heaven and hell would deter deviance, but that community participation through church membership would create an encompassing moral environment. The idea is that social ties in the moral community, perhaps even more than actual religious practices or beliefs, hold the individual accountable, provide concrete, human motivations for behavior (as opposed to abstract or intangible concepts of faith), and impart a sense of duty.

With this in mind, we now look at participant data around personal relationships, both in prison and out. What we find is that most prisoners who find faith in prison, perhaps most prisoners in general, have a paucity of close social ties when they are incarcerated. The social ties that the prison faith group offers, then, are particularly appealing, providing community, love, faith plausibility, and a moral context.

“Family” Ties

Inmates who are closer to their families program better. – CVP Correctional Officer 3/12/03

Most of us conform in order to retain the good opinion of our friends and family. But some people lack attachments. Their rates of deviance are much higher than are those of people with an abundance of attachments. (Stark and Finke 2000:117-118)
The correctional officer's observation that inmates with closer ties do better in prison programs is consistent with Stark and Finke's assertion about conformity, with one caveat. Lofland and Stark pointed out some years ago that sometimes religious conversion is an act of conformity; sometimes it is an act of deviance (Lofland and Stark 1965). We assert that in prison it is both at once. So if the concept of deviance is broadened to include joining a religious group, despite the disapprobation of certain social ties, then, if the above stated perspective holds, those with weak family ties might still "program" well if this lack prompts them to deviate in the direction of religious involvement, and their new attachments create a similar dynamic as a "close family." To examine this more closely, we now turn to the statements of the participants themselves.

Ten of the eighteen participating ex-felons who had converted in prison specifically mention that they had very few close ties with people outside or that they had been abandoned by friends, spouses, children, parents and other loved ones once they were incarcerated.

The sense of abandonment was strong for Jeffrey Curtis, who has already referenced an abusive father in a previous section.

Strange enough, on the outside, every friend I had in the world deserted me. My kids blamed me for everything that had gone wrong in their lives and deserted me. Even so-called church members deserted me. But inside I found friends that I really could trust with my life. – Jeffrey Curtis

Bill Roberts also felt abandoned.
Only had 3 visits the whole time [in 7 years]. It was great, but then it was torture for months afterwards. You get to visit... and then they’re gone. – Bill Roberts

David Ringer lost family members once he was incarcerated, which was something mentioned previously by both Jerome Ingles who had lost a marriage and a daughter, and by Nick McDonnell who lost family members and “a lot of dear friends.” David Ringer recounts:

I have a twin brother. My incarceration ended our relationship for a number of years... I’m close to one of my daughters, but the other one I don’t speak to because of the incarceration. – David Ringer

This is just a partial indication of the frequency with which family and community ties are strained for prisoners. Most already have tenuous and dysfunctional relationships with family and friends outside and even those who don’t find that their relationships suffer greatly during incarceration. For religious inmates, however, there is a new community to which they may attach which, according to many participants, becomes a family.

Jameelah Haddad explains how she is in a certain sense closer to her Muslim community than to her actual family.

[I’m close with] my family, but my Muslim sisters and brothers, we have a bond that me and my mother and my father and my brothers will never have – only if they accept Islam as their religion and as their way of life. OK? It’s a difference because a believer knows and understands. A person that don’t understand that don’t know this deen, the deen is the way of life, is one that has no – they can’t conceive it because they don’t have it and they don’t understand it... Because a lot of people don’t understand Islam, so when you try to explain it to them and explain to them what we believe in, and that there’s only one God. See a lot of people believe that just because you say Allah, that you’re talking about something altogether different... In the Bible God says, ‘I have many names’ and they’re not hearing it. So, therefore, if we can keep the conversation of religion
out of our conversation, OK we’re fine. You know, but they don’t never want to come to our functions, our gatherings that we have, just to…get a full understanding of it, but they want you to come to all of their functions. So, I just leave it alone. I just leave it alone. Even like my grandmother, my grandmother, she says, ‘Now, Baby, who is your God?’ And I have to tell her, ‘Big Mama, it’s all the same, it’s only one God.’” - Jameelah Haddad

Abdul Haddad also uses the word family to describe his Muslim ties.

Family, now the Muslim community is my family. I’m still close with mother and siblings. In my family only me and my brother have embraced Islam. [It] does not interfere with my relationship with my mother. She’s no denomination, neither. My mother don’t attend, but she’s a strong believer. My brother embraced Islam – he’s also incarcerated, too. I can’t say when he took shahadah. He read interpretation of the Qur’an years ago. I can’t say what year. Maybe, he was arrested in 96, so after 96. – Abdul Haddad

For Rachid Abdullah, converting to Islam was indeed an act of deviance. His friends and family did not understand, and the choice to embrace Islam pushed him further away from his blood relations.

My friends didn’t understand me being Muslim, they would talk crazy to me and I would talk crazy to them and we would go our separate ways. Sometimes I would try to educate them. But my family – I was at my mom’s house, and Mama’s a real staunch Baptist. She’ll hit you with that Bible if you don’t go by it. I tried to explain it to her as non-threatening as I could about my religion. One Saturday morning – a couple of doors from my mom’s house is a mini-park – my brother and some of his friends were in the mini-park smoking marijuana. Now she’s totally against this. I’m back in my bedroom and I’m thinking about my life, trying to put my short-term goals together. She opened the door on me and said, “What are you doing back there?” Now, I’m staying back in that room keeping away from what’s going on, brother’s smoking weed, playing dominoes, using foul language. Mama said, “You need to go out there and socialize with your brothers and your friends out there.” Normally she would be bitterly against that, but I was trying to put some distance between what they were doing and myself, and she was worried about why I was acting different…Her next question was “What did they do to you in prison?” I don’t even think she knew what she meant by that. And I told this woman, “I’m in my religion I don’t want to hang out, smoke weed, talk foolishness.” As a result, and I appreciate her accommodating me, but I left there. I didn’t have any money when I left. I moved into a motel, and the motel was so expensive, it took all the money from my job. But living alone afforded me peace. So I took a second job, in order to save money to get a
place. The worst thing was getting my family to understand where I was coming from. “We didn’t raise you as no Muslim. Why you can’t eat that? You ate it all your life!” And I’d say “When you get new information, better information, you’re supposed to implement it.” And that was how I saw it. I was going beyond that. My mama would say, “I don’t know what’s wrong with you boy.” My sisters, it never really made them any difference. It was just the same to them whether I was or wasn’t Muslim. But my mom and my brother next to me had all the questions, and they were not asking questions to gain new information, but to challenge me. – Rachid Abdullah

Christians use the language of kinship just as often as the Muslim ex-felons do to describe their social ties in the faith.

All of my relationships really are there [at my church]... My family and my friends are pretty much all at one spot and that over there [at the church]... I have a spirit of discernment. I know if you have really given yourself to Jesus or not. And those that did, they were like brothers to me [in prison]. I could talk to them – Bill Roberts

I had a new family to welcome me... Every single one of my friends inside was Christian... I don’t even go looking for friends outside of the faith. – Jeffrey Curtis

Very much like Rachid Abdullah, Tommy Iglesias found that the faith that he acquired in prison distanced him from his family when he was released. He describes his relationships with other Christian inmates as being more like family than his relationships with his actual relatives.

My family background, like one of my cousins is from the M (M sur trece, Mexican Mafia). A lot of my cousins they’re all involved in drugs and organized crime. You know, it’s like, “Deny it till the end,” those were some of the things, you know, “Deny it to the end.” “No such things as telling on anybody.” And all these other things, which I couldn’t understand because I never found that support. Even though I was involved in gangs and all that, there was never no loyalty. Never. The only time I ever felt loyalty was from people in church... I got transferred to CMC West for my last 7 months. I lost all my support, my good Christian friends. When I hit the other yard, it was like I had to start over again. But I came in there strong. Everybody was like, “Whoa, this dude is a trip. He’s like a minister.” I felt like I was by myself again, and this yard was out of control. Christians didn’t have respect. So it was like starting over again. So
those seven months, I was already going through difficulties. Then what happened was when I came out and I finally went to the house, I thought they [my family] were going to receive me with open arms, and say “Whoa! This guy, he’s changed!” But instead they started alienating themselves from me. They used to say, “You’re too holy – you’re too holy for us.” There’d be times where I’d be in the house, I’d be all, you know, being an inspiration – someone who was good, doing the right things. And they’d leave. I started saying, “Wait a minute – what’s going on here?” I couldn’t understand it. Now that I’m doing well, they don’t want to be around me. It just kept getting worse. They would bring drugs around me, and constantly talking with them. They would make accusations like, “You’re going to fall again. You’ll be back getting high.” And I’d be trying to find a way, but I didn’t know...I didn’t know about going to Christian homes to become stronger in my faith. I’d heard of them, but I hadn’t really inquired. I was still trying to lead a regular life, trying to be a part of the community, and yet serve God. But it became worse and worse with the family members and stuff. Until it was like, I felt like an outcast. I always wanted to be accepted into something. Even in prison I felt part of a congregation. It was a good feeling because we were all at peace with one another. It was tranquil. When I left that yard, although I was doing time I felt like I wasn’t doing time. It was all right. I felt like each one of us were like family. God had given us heart for one another. None of us ever lacked anything...prayer, love, pictures. It was like having your family there. It was like a real family. When I got transferred from the yard I felt like my family was taken from me...You develop an intimate trust of one another. Love for one another. Mutual respect, and brotherly love, you know, it wasn’t like homosexuality and all of that. It was real love. Caring for one another, you know, men. It was a trip. – Tommy Iglesias

For some felons who find faith in prison, the new religious beliefs put them at odds with old social networks, and they are forced to choose whether or not to defend their faith. For others, the old social networks are too disintegrated to challenge the influence of the new ones. Regardless, it does seem that social ties do play an important role for many who convert, which is particularly interesting to consider in prison where extant social ties are disrupted and new social ties are uniquely arranged.
**Social Capital**

For these participants, joining a faith group held importance in terms of their interactions with fellow prisoners. As we attempt to understand the significance of these social dimensions of faith involvement in prison, some of the explanatory concepts from rational choice theory become unavoidable, or, at least, their utility becomes evident.

As we have mentioned earlier, rational choice theory understands human relations in terms of cost-benefit analyses, transactions of goods and services, investment exchanged for rewards, and other quasi-economic concepts. One of the key pieces in the rational choice approach to religion is *social capital*. According to Stark and Finke, preserving and maximizing social capital motivates certain religious choices.

In their own terms,

*Social capital consists of interpersonal attachments...* [M]ost people, most of the time, have accumulated a network of relationships that they regard as valuable. When people base their religious choices on the preferences of those to whom they are attached, they conserve (maximize) their social capital – they do not risk their attachments by failure to confirm, and therefore they do not face the potential need to replace their attachments. (Stark and Finke 2000:118-119)

In other words, according to this perspective, the degree to which one values or is valued by his social attachments will contribute to his decision whether or not to reaffiliate or convert. So if an individual has close ties with people who are changing religious orientations, that individual will be more likely to change, too. If an individual has close ties with people who are not changing, and encounters a new faith group, she will be less likely to change than she would be if she had no such ties.
And if an individual has loose or no pre-existing social ties, he will have less holding him back from adopting a new faith where there are new ties forming. In the testimonies above, former inmates talk about their family bonds having been weak or troublesome at the time of incarceration – this would be understood in rational choice terms as low social capital. The new bonds, family-like and reaffirming, would be considered to be opportunities for increased social capital. Furthermore, Stark and Finke state that “Social networks make religious beliefs plausible and new social networks make new religious beliefs plausible” (Stark and Finke 2000:117 emphasis original). So when inmates become involved in a new faith, they are also becoming involved in a new social network, which, according to this theory, can help facilitate belief in the new tenets.

The statements from religious participants support the rational choice assertion that maximizing social capital can bear upon religious choices. Inmates with less to lose may see more to gain from religious involvement, and the new social ties may increase the plausibility of the faith. And, in turn, the new social ties also create a sense of interdependency which may help validate the moral communities hypothesis. In the new family that the faith group provides, inmates find a reason to abide by the moral principles held by the group.

But, lest this perspective overstate the rational, let us remember why social supports and relationships are valuable to human beings: love. In the next section, participants discuss quite plainly how their faith groups provided them with kindness and a sense
that they were loved. Implicit in some of the statements above about family, statements about love explain just why the new faith group social ties are so very powerful.

_Human Kindness and the Company of God’s Love_

Jack Henry Abbot writes in _In the Belly of the Beast_,

> It used to be a pastime of mine to watch the change in men, to observe the blackening of their hearts. It takes place before your eyes. They enter prison more bewildered than afraid. Every step after that, the fear creeps into them. They are experiencing men and the administration of things no novels or the cinema – nor even the worst rumors about prison – can teach. (Abbott 1981:121)

Which is to say, prison is not known as a place of love and kindness. When one finds love and kindness in prison, then, it is something to remark upon. Meredith Buchanan describes how the simplest gesture of humanity can be of great value in a place like prison.

> Sister Theresa, one time – a couple of us had gotten in trouble and we were given a detail of using toothbrushes...and we had to scrub the lines between the bricks with these toothbrushes all day. And she came walking by and she said, “Wait right there.” And she came back and she brought all of us Kotex’s and had us tape Kotex’s to our knees. So we wouldn’t get [bruises]. It was so neat. I loved her. And we said, “We’ll get in trouble!” And she’s like, “No you won’t. Just tell them I gave it to you.” –Meredith Buchanan

Jose Arboles, who had no criminal record before he began a six year sentence for an armed robbery he still claims he did not commit, tells of how meaningful it was just to be treated like a human being in a place where hearts blacken. Jose was raised Catholic, but adopted a Non-denominational Christian perspective after his ordeal.

> There were many a times, I mean, I lived behind that wall, everyday was a struggle for your life. Every single moment was a nightmare. The only solitude
that I did have was not in my 4 by 8 cell, locked in there where nobody could get to me or where I couldn’t get out. But it was when I made my way down there to that Catholic chapel to the first service that I attended. I met [the chaplain]. That was my refuge, that place. It was a place of solitude. I felt God’s presence. I felt safe. I felt it was a place that made me feel that I wasn’t where I was...There was a Catholic deacon who would volunteer his time...He would just let us feel like we were normal, and just humans. And [he] treated us with respect and encouraged us. Yeah, sure we sat around and did some Bible stuff, and asked questions about this or that. But he was just there for you...

[later] [Being a Christian gave me]Comfort. I knew I was never alone even though I was alone. I knew that I could always, I knew that...I realized the second day I was there that I could not do this by myself. That I couldn’t do it without God. – Jose Arboles

If religious seekers in prison are looking for compensators for what they lack in their lives, for rewards otherwise unobtainable, then God’s love, endless and unconditional, might also be of value. Jeffrey Curtis explains how important his sense of God’s love was because he had never felt love from a father.

I told you about my being raised without a dad, and then the abusive Father-Figure? You know the greatest blessing of all? That prayer was answered. I’ve got the best Dad in the whole world [in God]. And that’s how close our relationship is...Without that relationship, I’d be back I prison. –Jeffrey Curtis

Dan Tucker also expresses an appreciation for having God as his new and perfect father when he says “I was His kid.” Jeffrey Curtis later says that accepting Jesus Christ as his personal savior was, “the first time in my life I felt unconditional love.”

Bill Roberts describes God’s love similarly:

I kept looking into more and more into who Jesus was. Who Jesus is. And I found [chokes up] the most compassionate person. Somebody that actually loved me 100% unconditionally. And I had never ever known that. And I realized I didn’t know what love was, and a lot of things became clear to me. – Bill Roberts

For several of the participants, the appeal of God’s love was not only that it was endless and unconditional, but that it was ever-present. Again, for some, this was
particularly valuable because of what was lacking in their lives even before their incarceration. Meredith Buchanan, Sandra Pacheco and David Ringer’s comments below add to statements imbedded in quotes from Jose Arboles, Nick McDonnell and Fernando Vega above. All of these comments express the speaker’s confidence that with God’s love he or she is never alone. The participants who made such comments happen to be Christian rather than Muslim, which may have something to do with the Christian emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Now, Kairos didn’t profess or try to save, but I got that from them. The light came on...Christ always loves me. Did before [incarceration], did during and will after...I could die this moment and I wouldn’t regret anything in my life because it brought me to this moment. I really love God and I love surrendering and letting myself be an expression of that love for God...The best thing about it is being able to help others. I’m not lonely anymore. I used to be lonely all the time. Even when I was married, or involved, I was always lonely. Once I really surrendered to Christ, I’m not lonely. I’m not ever lonely anymore. – Meredith Buchanan

That no matter what comes my way, any kind of situations, tragedy, I’ll be OK. I can have the feelings and not be alone. My faith is carrying me full. Before I felt alone. In a room of 100 people I still felt alone. – Sandra Pacheco

[The best part of my faith is] having a relationship with God. Having a sense of completeness, whatever happens you’re not alone. It’s like building your house on a rock, not on shifting sand. Now I have a foundation, a value system. I’m going in a positive direction, associating with the right kind of people. – David Ringer

So human relationships formed in faith groups are very important, in helping to determine whether or not someone converts or reaffiliates, and in providing a sense of love in lives that are otherwise largely lacking it. Alongside the love of their faith community, the love these participants feel from God also gives them an important sense of belonging and comfort. And right next to love from God and the
community, in both Christianity and Islam, is *forgiveness*. Below we will see how valuable that has been to study participants.

**Reintegration**

We can potentially take some practical lessons from the last section. According to the data presented above, faith group involvement entails social interdependence, provides human closeness, and makes inmates feel loved. These experiences, in turn, promote adherence to pro-social norms. Understanding the role that community ties have in leading prisoners away from a life of offending not only helps demystify the phenomenon of religious transformation in prison, it may furnish us with an important concept for secular use. In other words, prison policies and programs that involve social interdependence, human closeness and love may have a better chance of moving prisoners away from unlawful means of survival and toward a more community-oriented mentality. Similarly, the lessons we learn from the data below on forgiveness may have practical uses beyond their ability to explicate the phenomenon of finding faith in prison.

**Braithwaite’s Reintegrative Shaming**

Earlier, in describing the despair that helped lead them to faith, both Shane Johnston and Nick McDonnell expressed painful regret and shame. James Gilligan asserts that, “shame causes hate, which becomes violence (usually toward other people), and guilt merely redirects it (usually to the self)” (Gilligan 1996: 236). Furthermore, guilty feelings are often associated with fears that one cannot be forgiven, and this can stand as an impediment to an offender’s rehabilitation (Presser 2003). John Braithwaite’s theory laid out in *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* distinguishes between
stigmatizing shame and reintegrative shame, and attaches great importance to forgiveness. For him, *reintegrative shaming* is associated with low crime rates and conscience-building for the criminal offender (Braithwaite 1989:69-107). He defines reintegrative shaming below:

> Reintegrative shaming is shaming which is followed by efforts to reintegrate the offender back into the community of law-abiding or respectable citizens through words or gestures of forgiveness or ceremonies to decertify the offender as deviant. (Braithwaite 1989:100)

Braithwaite's is a social theory and as such focuses on societies, cultures and subcultures that shame, stigmatize, forgive and reintegrate offenders. It does not discuss the possibility of God's forgiveness acting as a reintegrative force. But he does recognize some Christian concepts of the repentant sinner and Christian forgiveness, and he uses the example of the quasi-religious 12-step programs as one of the rare examples of reintegrative shaming in our criminal justice system (Braithwaite 1989:101,162), demonstrating the potential applicability of the theory to our data.

*Forgiveness and Rebirth*

As membership in a faith group in prison is as much social as it is spiritual (Dammer 1992; Clear, Dammer et al. 2000; Dammer 2002), God’s forgiveness cannot be strictly separated out from the forgiveness of other community members. But it is God’s forgiveness that the ex-felons mention as they discuss their liberation from the pain of guilt.
Shane Johnston’s guilt haunted him as his screaming victim reappeared to him nightly in dreams. This guilt was assuaged only by God’s forgiveness.

If there is one thing that I got in prison, after surrendering my life to Christ, I had peace. I could go to sleep at night. I didn’t care if I even woke up. I didn’t have a death wish, I still don’t. But He gave me a peace that I couldn’t understand, and I don’t deserve it even today. But I could go to sleep. In fact, from that night on the prison yard to this very night I’ve never had that nightmare that I used to have for 18 months. I’ve never had it again. – Shane Johnston

Nick McDonnell discusses his regret, his hope, and his sense of being forgiven:

It gave me an opportunity to connect with people who didn’t live in prison, specifically the volunteers, that was huge. Faith is an eternal hope, right. I mean when I began to realize that in my faith there was room for me to believe that – I mean, I don’t know what heaven looks like, but maybe God is independent of time. And maybe you can step into time like a looking glass instead of have this finite, single directional relationship with it. I started embracing those kinds of things, I realized, maybe I can put my son on a school bus when he’s five years old, after all. Maybe I can see that. Maybe I can teach my stepdaughter how to drive on her sixteenth birthday after all. Maybe I can do all those things that I feel like I’ve missed forever, in the hope of eternity. In the hope of heaven. And I can see a bigger picture that even makes sense. Out of all my sin and suffering I can see my victims shine in some way I can’t imagine. And in some way I contribute to positively instead of hideously. All that hope begins living a life inside of you. Eventually it began, for me, to be difficult to see how people got through something like prison with out that kind of hope...

Nick’s regret is closely tied to his hope, because of his faith. Here he continues to describe his regret and shame, and finally his belief that he could be forgiven.

There’s a conversation in my life that goes on in some form or another every day, not as often in regimented prayer as I feel I should some days. But there’s always a conversation. I’m not alone, and I love that...Earlier in this interview I mentioned the period when I could not imagine an acceptable future or condition for my life. Even if I succeeded financially, did well at work, did something remarkable in the community that was positive, I could not imagine an acceptability to living with the shame and horror of what I did to go to prison in the first place and [what I] created for the innocents in my life. Becoming a Catholic and developing a relationship with Christ has shown me otherwise, in ways that only, as a person of faith I know, only God could have figured out – how to make life not only acceptable but wonderful and worthwhile and rich. And those sweet moments of real connection with full knowledge that I’m forgivable and forgiven. That’s a fleeting one; I struggle with that. It’s a fleeting
experience to sense one’s forgivable-ness, and to know that I’m forgiven. It’s a Christian teaching and understanding, but it doesn’t mean I can wrap my heart around it. But I’ve had moments, only through the grace of God have I had those moments. I have a really sweet life. I’m a wealthy man in friendship and love, and conversation and sharing. – Nick McDonnell

What Nick McDonnell calls his “forgivable-ness” is an essential element to the process of reintegration, as opposed to stigmatization. One needs to believe that one might be forgiven and reintegrated in order to accept responsibility, which is a pre-cursor to apology, which is in turn a pre-cursor to forgiveness and reintegration (Braithwaite 1989; Tavuchis 1991; Presser 2003). David Ringer, who converted to Catholicism, can accept responsibility because he believes God allows him to make mistakes.

Prison is a really difficult experience: demeaning, disheartening, depressing. You have to be strong even when you want to go up against a wall and cry, and I did do that...I used to think God had deserted me, when actually I had deserted God...A lot of it was, when you try to have a good relationship with God, you have to have a lot of introspection,[ and you say to yourself] ‘I made these mistakes and I need to correct it. Here’s what I did wrong and it’s my fault.’ God gives you the ability to make mistakes. – David Ringer

Jerome Ingles puts it very simply: “I know how to confess and begin again.”

Though confession is an expressly Christian ritual, the mercy of God is also a prominent theme in Islam, where it is called rachim arachma,. The same emphasis on confession, penance and redemption is not found in Islamic texts or in the testimonies of Muslim ex-felons, but according to Imam Mahmoud, in Islam God is all-merciful. Furthermore, Imam Mahmoud explains that unlike the Christian idea that each human being is born with original sin, in Islam every person is understood
to have a perfect nature from which we stray, but to which we may always return. He
goes into this as he describes his role in the prison:

One of the things Islam looks at is that the individual has been created by Allah,
by God, with a perfect nature. It’s called in Arabic *fitr...* what God has made you,
your nature.... As a human being you have to be taught... the role of religion is to
.teach you that... because without that... people become materialistic, they become
greedy; they do things that are opposite of what God wants for the creation for the
human beings.... Our goal is to return back that original position that God put us
in. – Imam Mahmoud

Braithwaite’s theory fits the Christian *modus operandi* rather neatly. He writes,

Cultures which hold up models of adopting the repentant role will be cultures
which succeed in shaming that is reintegrative. Such role models do exist in
Christian cultures of the West, though the Prodigal Son is hardly one of our
leading folk heroes. The sacrament of penance, confession, baptism as a rite
during which the sinner is reborn and washed clean of past sins, and other cultural
apparatus which routinize the repentant role have withered or disappeared in the
West. (Braithwaite 1989: 162)

Of course, these apparatus have not entirely disappeared, nor are they the exclusive
domain of Christian cultures. In Islam the idea of being washed clean is not overtly
linked to any “repentant role,” but it is a key element in taking *shahadah*, which is
described below by Imam Mahmoud.

“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.” All you have to
do is say that once with conviction and you’re a Muslim. That’s all there is.
From that point on you’re given a clean slate. You’re like a newborn. – Imam
Mahmoud

Like Imam Mahmoud, Reverend Roger Ruskin, the Protestant chaplain at CVP, also
uses an image of the offender becoming new again when he describes why Christian
faith appeals.

All the programs make the men sensitive to the fact that they have victimized
people. It forces them to face their crime. The guilt can be overwhelming. The
only way through it is through a relationship with God...Through a relationship with God, they can become a born again spirit, a new creation. That they can live with. They may never be able to live with who they used to be...It helps them to see themselves in a brand new light and to use a language that is not dehumanizing. They get a new identity, a new vocabulary and a community that supports that. - Rev. Roger Ruskin

The appeal that an opportunity to be born again might hold for a criminal offender in prison presents little mystery. Meredith Buchanan describes it as a wonderful feeling.

After going to Kairos I started feeling more love and attention from Christ. I could see Christ in others. And my awakening was there. That wonderful feeling like all of a sudden you’re born anew. – Meredith Buchanan

Through involvement in faith groups, these felons may find not only a sense of forgiveness to ease their guilt and self-loathing, but what is tantamount to a second chance. Faith uses, as Reverend Ruskin puts it, “a language that is not dehumanizing.” When the entire process of criminal prosecution and incarceration places the offender as an outcast, and stigmatizes and shuns him or her, the “reward” of redemption would be of obvious value.

Here again we can see that these lessons about reintegrative shaming and forgiveness may have application in the general field of criminology. Our data substantiate Braithwaite’s claims and lend support to this one dimension of his general theory. Rituals of forgiveness are almost non-existent in the prisons, and yet they are of tremendous value in the process of moving from stigmatized “deviant” to reintegrated citizen.
Transformation

We have now seen that prison faith involvement functions to provide moral communities and reintegrative shaming, both of which are concepts from sociological theory associated with restoring the criminal offender to non-offender. Both of these concepts are also contained in the larger notion of transformation, which sits at the center of this dissertation. Below we will look at how participants themselves discuss the phenomenon that “cannot be documented,” and we will, once again, try to glean some practical lessons from what we hear.

Religion Reintegrates

Religious advocates in the prisons express very clearly in some of their statements that their role is to teach offenders how to be moral and functional members of society. In fact, in the nine hours of prison religious service that I observed, and in the many conversations I had with religious personnel, I heard little mention of otherworldly consequences. Rather, religious workers emphasize that they serve a rehabilitative purpose in the prison (the exception to this is the Catholic ministers, almost all of whom expressed that their purpose in the prison is to demonstrate compassion through God’s mercy and love).

CVP Protestant chaplain Reverend Ruskin articulates his role:

In terms of showing offenders morality, we’re it. A guy can spend 10-12 years in prison without ever learning that killing is wrong. The religious staff and programs are the only ones communicating the relationship between ethics and morality. Without religion all you have is a lot of people warehoused here.

[Crime begins with] the child’s inability to deal with authority. Abuse, verbal abuse, lack of affection. Some of these men were never told they could...
accomplish anything until they affiliated with a gang. If we can begin focusing on parenting skills, we’ll see crime rates go down. Until we see that they won’t go down. We have to bring back ethics. It’s got to be more than law. It’s values that give meaning to law... My primary purpose is to promote the Kingdom of God, an order of life endorsed by God, sustained by God, infused by God. I’m here to be an ambassador of that order of life...To me that will be true healing. I am a healer. – Rev. Roger Ruskin

Imam Bilal, the Muslim chaplain at CVP, answers the question, “What is the purpose of your work here?”

Trying to get [the prisoners] to think differently, to approach life differently. Look at the sins you’ve made, and change the way you feel about it. – Imam Bilal

And Imam Mahmoud specifically sees his work as “corrective.”

What we are trying to do is social reform - we are trying to correct the behavior of people who have made mistakes in the past. – Imam Mahmoud

Jake Jacobs, the director of prisoner services at CVP also sees the rehabilitative function of the chaplains.

I think religion makes a major, major impact on inmates’ ability to do time. And chaplains will use religion to bring in other topics – money, fathering, and family. – Jake Jacobs (Field Notes 3/12/03)

Billy Jensen from PFM recognizes the ministry’s role as in certain ways consistent with the interests of prison administrators.

The administration sees this as a favorable thing...I believe the prison administration would like to see more prisoners adopting faith. – Billy Jensen

So does former inmate Bill Roberts who now volunteers for Bill Glass Ministries.

The amazing thing is, the thing about – Prison Fellowship and Bill Glass have such a significant impact on the prisons. They make the prison’s job easier. There are testimonies by the wardens that go on and on and on and on about how the violence in the prisons is reduced by our presence. It’s encouraged. – Bill Roberts
The following dialogue between Jake Jacobs, the Director of Prisoner Services at CVP, and Eduardo Sanchez, the Assistant Warden there, supports Billy Jensen and Bill Roberts’s belief.

Jacobs: I can say that I’ve seen inmates who have decided that they don’t want a revolving door...They learn how to program – they find some common good in some faith –

Sanchez (interrupts): But that’s the best-case scenario.

Jacobs: Yes, that’s best-case. It doesn’t always happen like that. But on the other hand, this guy came in and the staff loved him. He became an inmate trustee. He was a strong leader in the Muslim religion, and he is paroled and is doing really well. You know, if you want to find religion, it’s there.

Sanchez: It’s like a light switch. Something happens and you can see the dude changed. It’s a positive thing for us. (Field Notes 3/12/03)

Support from prison administrators would be anticipated, considering that alongside moral reform, church and corrections are in sync on another count: submission to authority. The Protestant chaplain at CVP explicitly affirms this function of Christian involvement for inmates:

Among the Christian inmates, violence is almost zero. It helps the men deal with authority. I preach to them from Romans 13...It promotes accountability among each other. – Rev. Roger Ruskin

Romans 13:1-5 reads as follows:

*Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is not authority except from God and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’ sake. (Romans 13:1-5)*
Some of the Protestant participants appear to have taken the theme of this passage to heart – they say that giving their lives to Jesus has helped them submit to authority, which they see as part of a remedy to the problem that brought them there in the first place.

Meredith Buchanan found herself more deferential once she really embraced Christian faith.

Once I had the spiritual awakening I was a lot different...I stopped getting in trouble, stopped mouthing off to people. I started giving myself and others more respect and cooperating. – Meredith Buchanan

Jeffrey Curtis also found that “walking with the Lord” entailed submission to authority, and, like Reverend Ruskin, he brings up “accountability” in the same breath.

As I saw honest change happening in men’s lives, that drew me in more and more. I should say drew me out. God didn’t put any of the disciples through seminary, that’s our requirement. Go back and read the stories. He called them out and said come on, walk with me. It was OJT from the get-go. On the job training. That’s exactly what [my pastor] did. It was a new facility so it was like a church plant. It was walking with the Lord daily. It was heavy on accountability and responsibility. And having to submit to authority daily. And that meant to the cops, to those in charge over me. – Jeffrey Curtis

Accountability is an unmistakable theme among the Muslim ex-felons as well. In another section, Khadijah Perkins makes a statement that in Islam Jesus didn’t die for her sins and that Islam held her accountable more than her Christian upbringing had, an aspect of Islam she profoundly appreciated. Imam Bilal from CVP concurs precisely with Khadijah.
Islam focuses on accountability more than Jesus [does]. Accountability is missing in a lot of these guys’ lives. – Imam Bilal

Abdul Haddad also mentions accountability, and Ali Hasan feels that Islam bolsters some core values:

We all sin, you know. Some just a little [more] than others. We all. We all. So we all going to have to be accountable for the things we do. When that time comes, I just hope that my scale weighs heavier to the right. *Insha’allah* it will. – Abdul Haddad

What [Islam] did do is it improved my interest in terms of my value system. Education. Cleanliness. Reverence in God, showing some acknowledgement. – Ali Hasan

A religion that requires, among other things, prayer five times a day provides structure and requires discipline. Consistent with the comments of Khadijah and Imam Bilal, Imam Mahmoud points out below that the great responsibility Islam imparts on incarcerated adherents helps to remedy the lack of responsibility that landed them where they are.

This was told to me by a Christian who works in the prison, who is a volunteer, and I think this is kind of strange for a Christian to say, but nonetheless this is what she said. She said, ‘I actually think Islam works better in this environment for the inmates than Christianity does, because it’s more structured.’ And one of the things that’s lacking in the lives of people who go to prison [is that] they didn’t have any discipline. And Islam gives you that discipline...I would say that Islam, because of the structure of Islam, and the discipline of Islam, it allows you to bring back the structure, to bring back the discipline that some people need – a lot of people need it, but it’s more a need of people who went to prison, because what brought them to prison was a lack of that. And now they get it back. The goal is to take it outside of the prison and make this a part of your life, and to live this everyday. – Imam Mahmoud

Muslim participants’ opinion of Christianity notwithstanding, it does appear that both Islam and Christianity provide prisoners with a sense of their own accountability, and that this sense is valued by the prisoners themselves. Some Christian inmates
specifically felt better at submitting to authority once they converted, a benefit of religious participation that is not lost on the prison personnel who happen to hold that authority.

So religion plays this reintegrative role, replacing the nomos, or as Imam Mahmoud says, the discipline, that was theoretically lacking in their anomie state. Furthermore, when religion can effect reform in this way in prison, it confers a positive quality upon the prison experience, at least for that individual.

**Prison Becomes A Good Thing**

Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference. (Berger 1967:29)

If it can carry an offender into a spiritual awakening where she is happier and more hopeful, prison comes to be understood as a good thing, a blessing, as it were. Prison, then, becomes what it was initially designed to be: a locus of redemption. In that initial design, the dreadfulness of punishment could more easily fall within acceptable limits because of, as Berger suggests, its association with religion's beneficence. Now divorced from religion, the prison is merely lent a hand by ambassadors of faith, but in their capacity to redeem the wrongdoer, they in effect redeem the institution as well, at least in the perception of that individual.
From the perspective of the chaplain, prison presents an opportunity for salvation and atonement. Here Roy McLean from the Archdiocese of San Francisco discusses the unique environment that the prison creates for spiritual growth.

Some prisoners experience remarkable spiritual development in prison. It’s almost beyond belief. In prison, they have time to reflect and transform. In a way, I am envious of the opportunity prison offers for religious concentration. Sometimes I think it’s more difficult to commit to faith in the outside world. – Roy McLean

Protestant chaplain Ruskin expresses an appreciation for the history of Christianity in the penitentiary, and assumes the legacy in his ministry.

Back in the late 1700’s, early 1800’s, it was the religious institutions at the time that introduced time as punishment. It was the church. Regretfully, because time is a gift from God. Here we reclaim the privilege and opportunity. We like to say you redeem time, not do time. – Rev. Roger Ruskin

Similarly, Imam Mahmoud sees the ways prison helps bring inmates to a place of spiritual searching.

Islam totally transforms you, especially for inmates... I think what happens in the prison setting is...when you go to prison you’re stripped down kind of bare, right? I mean, the goal of prison or the design of prison, the object, if you will, of prison, is to totally dehumanize people, to take away the identity of people, somewhat similar to what happens to you when you go into the military...to make you, mold you into the kind of person they want you to be. And in prison they want to make you a certain type of individual, so people start to look for other things. I think also what happens is that for the first time in a lot of inmates’ lives, this is the first time they’ve really had a chance to reflect on their situation. They haven’t been able to really stop and really think about what they’ve been doing with their lives. And now you’ve got all this time to do nothing but think. And I think that leads them through to their search to find a way...Prisoners come in and realize, “it’s time to take charge of my life.” Prison can be a training ground. – Imam Mahmoud
Inmates, too, retrospectively see how prison can actually help their spiritual growth.

Here Tommy Iglesias uses the same term that Imam Mahmoud does to describe prison.

Prison was a training ground for me. It was a place of training... God opens doors, and he holds you accountable. – Tommy Iglesias

For Ali Hasan, as well, prison was a time to reflect.

When I did spend time incarcerated, it was really about me, sitting down and thinking “Why am I like this? Why are things like this? Why am I here? What really matters to you?” Those kind of things. – Ali Hasan

Echoing Roy McLean’s thought that it’s harder to commit on the outside, and that prison presents an opportunity for reflection and spiritual growth, Sandra Pacheco and Jerome Ingles, both born again in prison, describe how that setting facilitated the change.

I pretty much was always the one in control, the shot caller, so I needed to be [incarcerated] for Him to get ahold of my life. I had visited a few churches and I just thought it was all BS. I was going by emotion, not by what was going on inside of me. I was looking at the people and not trying to find the Lord. – Sandra Pacheco

I think God’s plan is really what brought me here...I do know this, I do know that taking away my stuff an putting me in that cage for all those years definitely created the fertile ground...If it weren’t for that, if I could always get in a car and go get a beer, or go to some chick’s house or whatever, if those things had always been available, I don’t know if I would ever have got that tired of being tired...But I think being so alone, and having so much in me, because I was always a smart guy, having so much in me and being such a failure...I used to always tell people that either I would have been a terrorist or a world leader, one of the two, cause there was just so much in me. And then to be such a failure, caught in this little box in Folsom prison, that nobody even knows I’m – if I died, no one would even know it. That was enough to make me really start to examine what’s all this in here for?...Is it just so you could die in this cage? – Jerome Ingles
David Ringer, a Catholic, says quite simply, "There is a very strong religious presence in [prison]." Below Nick McDonnell, also a Catholic, describes that presence in comparison to an affluent Bay Area town. As he sees it, the misery of the institution intensifies that religious presence.

Plus we had a prison chapel – there’s nothing like a prison chapel. It’s dark, and it’s got bars. And you go to mass in prison and everybody in there is on the edge of psychological or physical death. It’s rich; it’s real; God is present. And then you come outside and God is real, God is rich, God is present, but – it’s very easy to – one of the reason people are attracted to the volunteer work is because there’s this, rich spiritual life in prison, and they don’t necessarily get that in Tiburon. – Nick McDonnell

Rachid Abdullah and Ja’far Saadiq, who embraced Islam in prison, also see prison’s intensity and how it catalyzed their conversion to Islam.

I knew about Islam before I went to prison. I hadn’t explored it fully. But going to Prison gave me an opportunity to really explore Islam. And I embraced it in totality. When I got out of prison, in pursuing my Islam, I became a model citizen – not because I wanted to become a model citizen, not even because I wanted to avoid going back to prison, but simply by staying in accord with my religion. Being in accord with my religion, I didn’t have to worry about any man-made enticements. – Rachid Abdullah

What prison helped me do was prison separated me from my drug addiction. And then I was in an incubator situation, where I had access to books, I had access to information. I was able to expose myself to some ideas that caused me to work on my inner life, my inner self, that would have came slower had I been in the world where I had to go to work and have different kinds of responsibilities. So I think it enhanced it because of the kind of isolation I was in. And it magnified it. In there everything is magnified. – Ja’far Saadiq

Khadijah Perkins and Jameelah Haddad both feel that going to prison was the only way that they could have found their way to Islam.

At that time I don’t believe I would have accepted Islam outside of prison...If I had continued on that same road that I was on, I don’t think I would have accepted Islam. – Khadijah Perkins
I don’t think I would have embraced Islam if [I hadn’t gone to prison]... There in prison I got to know the true meaning of it, and it wasn’t all a black thing. Out here, back then all I knew was people from the Nation of Islam that was following Farrakhan. I didn’t know Orthodox Islam, I didn’t know anything about that. – Jameelah Haddad

The statements from former inmates, irrespective of religious affiliation, reflect an appreciation for prison as a setting that is conducive to spiritual searching. But some go further to actually express gratitude for the positive impact that prison has had on their lives, going so far as to say that prison saved their lives. Below Imam Mahmoud is recounting what an inmate convicted to a life sentence under the 3-strikes law told him.

He said, “Coming to prison for me was a blessing.” He said, “If I had stayed out on the street I would never have gotten Islam.” He said, “I couldn’t get it on the street,” he said “I was too caught up in what I was doing.” He said, “I would either have had to kill someone or someone would have to have killed me.” – Imam Mahmoud

Shane Johnston, who compared his landing in prison to Jonah’s being swallowed by a whale, sees prison as having saved his life.

I think if I hadn’t gone to prison, Moira, I’d be dead....you could not have lived the life I was living, and had as many people afraid of you as were afraid of me, and continued to live...I don’t think I would have made it on the outside without going to prison, and I definitely wouldn’t have made it out of prison without Christ. – Shane Johnston

Jeffrey Curtis also says that prison saved his life, as does Bill Roberts.

If I had kept going the direction I was, I’d be dead. I do not blame God. God did not put me in prison. At the end of Genesis, the story of Jacob...At the end of the story when he was reunited with his brothers, he said, ‘What you intended for harm, God worked to the good, that His people might be saved.” Everything that happened to me I intended for harm. There was no good in me whatsoever, and if I had kept on going on the track I was on, I’d be dead, and maybe somebody else,
too. So I ended up in prison...make no mistake...it ain’t no place anybody wants to go. [It’s a] rat-infested hell-hole. And when you get those bars slammed behind you, that’s a feeling I hope you never have. I pray nobody ever has to go through it...It had a profound spiritual effect on me, though. Because what I intended for evil God used to save me. – Jeffrey Curtis

My sense of things is that God wanted my attention, and [prison is] how He did it. I mean, I think of the series of events as I grew further and further away from God, I believe He has a plan for me and I could not keep going down the path I was going, and He had to intercede. Because, Moira, the next thing that was going to happen is I was going to get taken or I was going to take another person’s life. That was the depth that I was at. When you consider a near shoot-out with the [Town name] Police Department with eleven cops against two guys, that’s a pretty dramatic situation. It wasn’t going to end right... Each step of the way dramatically cut my communication...to the point where I’m in [the Midwest] and I don’t know a soul. I don’t have any local phone numbers; I don’t have any local people; nobody can come see me. And by that time nobody can call me, and I can’t call them. So my mental picture is the box is slowly getting smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller. But the lid is off the box, Moira. So pretty soon I’m in this really tight box and there’s only one thing I can do: look up. So is Jesus going to have my attention at some point? Yep. Ultimately, there’s only one entity that has more power than God. Me. You. He can call, and we can say no. He will never, ever force us. It’s voluntary. I can say no. But I really believe He would have made his presence unavoidable for me. – Bill Roberts

In these statements we begin to see how powerful the belief in God’s direct intervention in these ex-felons’ lives is. Accepting life’s “trials and tribulations” (as both Jameelah Haddad and Jose Arboles put it in other sections), as part of God’s plan allows these inmates to approach the future without paralyzing regret, but instead feeling “blessed” to have ended up in prison.

Jose Arboles and Nick McDonnell are exceptional in our sample insofar as neither was involved in a criminal lifestyle prior to the prison experience that brought them close to God. Neither, then, would necessarily see ending up in prison as a reprieve.
from the self-destructive road down which they were headed. Nevertheless, each
does appreciate that it happened. Jose Arboles, who still maintains his innocence in
the armed robbery for which he was convicted, is not bitter, but rather accepting.

I still ask myself why didn’t we just go through the drive-through? Then they
would have never saw my face. But, oh well. So be it. This is where I am at
now, but I can understand it. Things happen for a good reason. And that’s what
I’ve done with my life since then.

Whether you want to call it fate, or this is what God planned out for me, it was
already written out in a book or something. You know, you talk like that to
people and they just get all...you know it’s just a little too deep for some people.
My answer is I would not change anything that has even happened to me in my
life. If I had a magic wand of if I could just snap my fingers and say, “Guess
what? Take that out of my life and let me start over from back in 79, 75, and see
what my life would have been.” [Shakes his head no] Truly this experience is
what’s helped me, made me, and put me where I am in my life. It’s part of my
journey. – Jose Arboles

Nick McDonnell is deeply regretful, but his regret does not entirely eclipse the
gratitude he feels for having made the journey, because it got him in touch with God.

[Prison may have affected my spiritual path, but that’s a] tough question for me
because I have an aversion to giving prison credit. Things obviously accelerated
just as God would have them accelerate with regard to developing a relationship
with Him. As a result I’m grateful for all that crap. I have to be, because I’m
really happy with who I got to become in the process of all this mess. But the
mess remains regrettable. And I don’t think I’ll ever live without the desire to
take it all back and make a different choice when I could have. But I have faith
that it makes sense in the big picture in ways I can’t understand. And clearly my
time for God happened for me when I was in prison. – Nick McDonnell

Prison may be a “rat-infested hell-hole,” but it was only by going down that hole that
these individuals were able to encounter God in the way that they did. That
transformative encounter with God then allows them to integrate the experience of
prison into their personal histories as a blessing instead of a misfortune. It shows
them how to submit to authority and how to accept their place in the order, or nomos,
thereby removing the threat of meaninglessness that, according to Berger, accompanies *anomie*. In this sense it appears that the prison may actually be enacting its role “supposed or demanded,” as an “apparatus for transforming individuals” (Foucault 1979). But, lest this analysis be nothing more than a reification of an abstract concept sociology has never even defined, we now turn our attention to defining the cornerstone of this study and every other piece of research that concerns faith and crime: *transformation*.

*Measuring Transformation*

Although the very first American prison was built on the premise of it, and every dollar spent thereafter on “corrections” has been implicitly justified by it, the *transformation* of individuals remains enigmatic. Etymologically, the word *transform* implies that something more than a simple, visible change has occurred. Rather, it denotes that a change in “composition or structure” has taken place (Webster 1986). How, then, does one measure the transformation of individuals? Surely people don’t change in composition when they claim to have experienced a personal transformation. Perhaps sociology should leave operationalizing this abstract concept to psychologists and theologians, and concern itself only with rates: crime rates, conversion rates, church attendance rates, recidivism rates, and the like. The problem with that is that an estimated $208 billion is spent annually (Shelden 2004) on a system based, at least in part, on a concept we don’t understand or know how to measure. Moreover, in the matter of crime and corrections, especially in relation to religion, sociology will not be satisfied with the analysis of rates. We already know that church-going inmates re-offend at approximately the same rate as
non-church-going inmates, and that it is only a small minority of deeply-involved religious inmates who have a markedly lower rate of recidivism (Knudten 1977; Johnson 1987; O'Connor, Ryan et al. 1996; Johnson, Larson et al. 1997; O'Connor 2002), this difference we must attribute to the manifestly inaccessible notion that they have been transformed.

As opposed to taking on the lofty and probably inappropriate task of designing a measure for human transformation, what we will do here is to 1) acknowledge that the concept, when applied outside the fields of chemistry and mathematics, is too elusive to be practical, and 2) move forward with the recognition that there are times when individuals register that their lives, perceptions, attitudes and perspectives have changed dramatically, and that when those individuals express that such changes have happened, they provide us with something that approaches a useful measure.

The following section documents statements from study participants that provide evidence that core values and pursuits have changed.

**Value System Transformed**

At the time of interview each of the 18 ex-felons had managed not to return to prison. By their own accounts, it is not simply that they have stopped breaking the law, but that they now see the world differently from how it once appeared.

[Islam gave me] a change in perspective. I don’t need the world anymore, I don’t need the big car, or the big home. My choices are totally different than they were before. If I didn’t have Islam I may still be searching for the utopia in America, and that forces you to make wrong choices, I think. – Khadijah Perkins
The values that once informed Khadijah’s decision-making have been replaced through Islam. She is therefore no longer vulnerable to the desire to steal or deal in illegal transactions, however profitable they may be. Shane Johnston, whose crimes were violent and generally perpetrated while high, also experienced a change in perspective that liberated him from any temptation to return to a life he no longer even recognizes as his own.

The reason I used a lot of drugs and what have you is that I didn’t like my world. Drugs helped me to escape the world that I was in. Now I accept things the way that they are and see what my role is in trying to make a difference. My life today doesn’t even compare to the life that I had. Sometimes I have to ask myself, did I really live that life? The answer is yes, but there is no comparison. – Shane Johnston

Still in prison, attending a Bible study group at CVP, Jerry discusses the experience of being saved as world-altering. He sees himself (and his friends in the chapel) as having changed (perhaps in “composition”) from “evil” to God-focused.

It is an earth-shattering life-changing experience. Most of us were pretty evil, rotten people. Now all we want to do is find out how we can please Him. It’s so amazing. You can’t describe it. – Jerry (Field Notes 3/23/03)

Some have seen their world change, others demonstrate a fundamental change in perspective as they describe rather generous attitudes toward fellow inmates. Once he had been saved, Dan Tucker was able to show kindness even to the guy who “snitched” him out.

In county jail in Sacramento, they kept me in a single cell and they had a separate order from my crime partner cause he was testifying against me. And we got put in a tank in the courthouse together one day. And he was smaller than me, and I had a reputation. And he was scared to death I was just going to kick the living crap out of him. And he had good reason to think that. But um, I led him to the Lord. He’s dead now. He just died last year. So, my hope is, I had never seen
him again, so I hope that he died at peace with God. But I had no heart to do anything to him. He may have just said yes to keep from getting his butt kicked, who knows? But I don’t know what ever happened to him. He died of natural causes. He was a heavy drug user and his body might have just given out on him, from something recent or something old. I don’t know. – Dan Tucker

Jose Arboles, since he maintains that he was falsely accused, does not talk about his own transformation, but he has faith in the transformations of the real perpetrators of “horrendous” crimes, whom he does not judge.

The convicts that I was around, just inspiring. You know, this is the most funniest thing you can do, and I say that, all kidding aside, is to walk into a prison and say, “I’m here and I didn’t commit the crime.” Ya ha ha, yeah right! We’re all innocent! No, you know. I was rubbing elbows with some guys that did some horrendous stuff, but that did turn and change their lives because of the Catholic faith. Hispanics, whites, blacks that were attending that church while I was there. I remember seeing that. I’ve seen transformations. I’ve seen God work, breaking down walls, breaking down barriers. Truly. – Jose Arboles

Even more explicitly espousing a non-judgmental view of his fellow prisoners, Nick McDonnell offers the following:

One of the things that occurred for me that wasn’t easy, was to really embrace – faith kind of teaches – Saint Paul talked about how he was the “chief among sinners” you know, here’s this saint in the church who is killing sinners in the church because they didn’t believe right, that sort of thing. I was cast into this environment that included death row and a lot of guys off death row would be escorted by and many notorious guys, Richard Allen Davis, [Richard Ramirez]. And you’d see them escorted by and people would go, “Ooh that’s such and such.” And I can remember thinking, because of my faith I was on this even ground with them. Prison is a funny environment. Here’s all these people castigated, cast from society, and rejected by society. Within that little society, you know, they’re going, “Oh, but he’s a child-molester! Oh, he’s a blah blah blah.” We’re making ourselves better than other people inside. That’s typical on the inside of prison. And my faith didn’t permit me to do that. I couldn’t do that. It was a gift and it was also a harsh reality. I had a relationship with the worst of the worst and I was among them. – Nick McDonnell
Having a generous attitude toward other offenders, and having a desire to please God or “make a difference” is a theme that comes out even more lucidly in some participants’ statements. Several of the ex-felons in the study demonstrate that they live the ideals of their faith, having made post-release choices with altruistic motives and attitudes.

**Giving Back and Altruism**

Patricia O’Brien held interviews with eighteen ex-inmate women who described themselves as having successfully transitioned from prison. From this research she surmises, “The ability to give back in some way was also an indicator to many of the women that they have been successful in their transition from prison” (O’Brien 2001:106). Shadd Maruna also found in his analysis of the Liverpool Desistance Study, that ex-offenders who were “making good” often adopt a “generative script,” which can involve productive and service-oriented activities (Maruna 2001).

Many participants in this study also showed a desire to “give back,” some through career choices, others simply through statements to that effect. Of the eighteen ex-felons I interviewed, four went into the ministry themselves after their release from prison, six went into social service professions working with disadvantaged or criminal populations, and four volunteer occasionally for prison ministry, substance abuse or faith-related programs. Only four did not make any mention of doing some sort of social service work. The Muslims had the greatest proportion of interviewees who work in service professions. Ja’far Saadiq became an Imam. Ali Hasan manages a residential drug program for returning offenders. Rachid Abdullah runs an
Islamic social services organization. Khadijah Perkins works at a center to assist women returning from prison. And Jameelah Haddad works at a community center for the homeless.

The intention to give back is also clear in several of the statements from both Muslim and Christian former inmates.

"Today, I feel best if I’m helping somebody... The spirit made a change in my spirit... Everybody is looking for truth, and they’re looking for peace. And they’re looking for the meaning of life... The meaning of life is others." – Bill Roberts

As mentioned earlier, Bill Roberts volunteers with Bill Glass Ministries, trying to reach current inmates. David Ringer also volunteers, for RCIA, the Catholic program that instructs inmates interested in converting to Catholicism.

"[Finding myself behind bars was] quite a life altering experience, one that I’m not very proud of. It happened and I’ve acknowledged that I made a mistake, and I have an obligation to try make things right by getting involved.

I think having a system where you are able to find faith in prison or wherever you are is essential. I’m sad that it took that much to get in contact with God. But if that’s what it takes, that’s what it takes... Rather than talking about your faith, it’s more important to act on it. I’ve tried to do that since my release. I actually feel very fortunate, and blessed, if you will. I honestly wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you today if it weren’t for Deacon Peter... I hope [he] realized how important he was. He really did make a difference. I try to pass it on to other people, being more enlightened and humane, volunteering with the RCIA class, trying to remind people what would Jesus do? WWJD, what would Jesus do?" – David Ringer

Sandra Pacheco has come to understand she can serve God by serving others, and that this is the only way she can stay true to her faith.

"You have to do this daily. I’m going to be an addict for the rest of my life. If I don’t keep doing my things: my meetings, my support groups, giving back what was given freely to me, being in service to other women, I will get loaded. No if’s and’s but’s or maybe’s. I’ve seen a million people do it. They stop going to
meetings, they stop going to church, they stop doing all the things that got them clean, then they wonder why they relapse. Moira, I’ve learned just by watching people that that doesn’t work. By the grace of God I have 8 years clean. I haven’t had to use or commit a crime in 8 years.

It made it easier when I was in lockdown, otherwise I would have gone crazy. But it was actually enjoyable. I would just talk to God. I’d start to pray, “I’m sure you know I’m not any good.” At that time my praying was really, really selfish. It was “You need to help me,” not, “I need to help You.” I had started using IV drugs when I was 15 years old and I needed some help…[Now] I don’t have that anger, hate, frustration. Before, I was mean and hateful. I would take anything you owned. I was very hateful, even after I started going to Bible study. It didn’t start to change me until I got alone [in Ad Seg]. That was when I really felt like God was trying to talk to me. Since then I’ve been praying everyday. Now when I pray I ask God, “What do you want me to do for you?” I have everything. God takes care of my needs. Now I ask Him “How do you want me to help?” – Sandra Pacheco

The change in attitude that these participants talk about, from criminal to altruistic, may or may not constitute a transformation of their essential substance. But an orientation toward helping other people through volunteer work, social service work or working in the ministry is unquestionably different from an orientation where the acquisition of property and drugs rule to the point of violence. And the participants in this study universally attribute these changes to faith involvement that began in prison.

So, the former prisoners who embraced faith in prison and lived to talk to me about it depict the experience as transformative in the following ways: it allowed them to submit to God’s will and therefore to authority in general; it allowed them to trust in a divine plan and to recast prison as provident; it changed their value system so that material life was less tempting; and it motivated them toward service and altruism. Aside from the practical lesson here, that engaging in acts of service and altruism...
may indeed be a meaningful indicator of a fundamental change in the life of a former offender, the statements from this section continue in the general theme of this chapter: that religion functions in a pro-social way. Whether it is providing close social ties that deter deviance or simply making prison workers' jobs "easier" by showing inmates how to submit to authority, religion's functions in the prison appear to be closely in line with those of prison authority and criminal justice officials. Or is it more complicated than that?

Alone, the ex-felons' testimonies in this chapter make a distinct impression that prison can be a wonderfully transformative place. The function of the prison in its early American conception, as reviewed earlier, was moral reform through isolation and religious exposure. So as we look at these testimonies and other supporting evidence, it appears that the prison is in fact serving its function. But that early conception did not account for the other elements that would become as much a part of the prison as the isolation. That is, extreme violence, racial division, gang formation and rule, staff abuse of authority, and other dimensions that at once interfere with and promote this function of the prison. As examined in other chapters, these factors play significant roles in prisoners' religious choices, and prevent us from viewing the evidence here as singular verification that the prison serves its original function. More to the point, however, we must bear in mind that this is essentially a study of outliers. Not only do most prisoners not actively involve themselves in faith while they are in prison, among those who do, most do not have the life-changing experience that these men and women had. We know this based on the findings of
previous studies, and we know this based on the accounts of our participants, which we will examine in the next chapter. The question of why religion fails for so many is something that has hardly been asked in the prior research. In the next section and in the subsequent chapter, we begin to build an answer.
Chapter VI: Faith Fluctuates

In our review of the historical role that religion played in the development of the American penitentiary, the notion of transformation came up repeatedly. In its initial conception, the prison was supposed to function to transform criminal offenders, and religion would be the instrument for the change. In sociological theory, one of the first functions of religion is social integration, a key element of which is maintaining equilibrium and order. Another function of religion is, of course, to comfort, to, as James says, reintegrate the divided self, and to produce moral and virtuous members of society. It is a seemingly simple fit between church and corrections, both envisioned as serving similar functions: to provide moral training, maintain social order, and fix what’s wrong in people.

By now, however, the institution of corrections has all but abandoned the goal of transformation, or even “correction,” for that matter (Parenti 1999). Currently our prisons contain and control their wards, then release them for the most part untransformed, except for the hearts that may have moved in the other direction, as Jack Abbot says, blackened. Religion, as an institution, has not changed in its functions – it still offers social and personal integration and moral indoctrination. Along with these things it provides, as our data show, unconditional love, mercy, and community. When we think of the two institutions in these terms – the prison as a dark place where hearts are blackened, and religion as a supportive thing where sinners find love – they sound rather antithetical, and a fit between the two seems peculiar.
Religion’s role in today’s prisons is certainly not as integral as it once was. But, as we have discussed before, religious representatives abound in the prisons. For a small minority of prisoners, religion does perform its original task of transforming the offender into an upright citizen, and, in effecting this change, turns prison into a transformative experience. When this happens it not only allows the prison to carry out its earliest purpose, it confirms the sociological theory that supposes religion to be order-producing and integrative.

Statements from religious prison workers and religious ex-felons show that they recognize and appreciate the common functions of corrections and faith, and that they have observed and lived the transformative power that their combination produces. But looking closer at the statements, it becomes clear that the transformative power is not as consistent as the natural fit would lead a person to believe. Rather, more often than not, the transformation is fleeting.

In this chapter, we will look at data that may at first appear to contradict the theoretical functions of religion, and the power of faith-based transformation. Upon closer look, these data do not contradict, but complicate the “simple” relationship between faith and institution, offender and institution, and offender and faith.

We start with the premise that most prisoners have some religious background in their lives, from which they strayed to some degree prior to entering the system (as
evidenced by the simple fact that they are in fact criminal offenders). And we go on to argue that this first fall from the path of grace is as much a reflection of that individual’s struggle as it is a reflection of the very nature of faith. In other words, we argue that faith in general can be quite ephemeral, fleeting, fragile.

**Religious Background or “Capital”**

Whether we use Starbuck’s concept of “religious expression” (Starbuck 1900), Lofland and Stark’s “religious problem-solving perspective” (Lofland and Stark 1965), or Rambo’s “religious availability” (Rambo 1993), there is precedence for considering an already-existing religious orientation that may pre-dispose some individuals to embrace faith. In this section we look at how recent theory tinkers with and applies these concepts, and how participants discuss their religious background.

**Religious Background**

As the figures early in this treatise demonstrate, a very large portion of Americans are affiliated with a faith. According a report from the Pew Research Council, only about 4% of Americans truly see themselves as non-religious (Kohut and Rogers 2002). That leaves 96% considering themselves religious, with a full 82% identifying as Christian. We recall, however, from Rodney Stark’s early work, that many Americans who identify as a member of a particular faith may have had little actual experience in that faith. They may have attended services only when they were children, or simply have a family affiliation strong enough to adopt the identity (Stark and Glock 1968). It may be extrapolated since few people in the country have no faith background whatsoever, that few individuals enter prison with no faith background, though many may have only a peripheral relationship to faith prior to
encountering it in prison. As William James writes, conversion itself can be understood as faith moving from a peripheral place to a central place in a person’s consciousness. In his words,

To say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy. Now if you ask of psychology just how the excitement shifts in a man’s mental system, and why aims that were peripheral become at a certain moment central, psychology has to reply that although she can give a general description of what happens, she is unable in a given case to account accurately for all the single forces at work. Neither an outside observer nor the Subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one’s centre of energy so decisively, or why they so often have to bide their hour to do so. We have a thought, or we perform an act, repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought ‘peals through us for the first time, or the act has suddenly turned into a moral impossibility. All we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to re-crystalize about it (James 1982:196-197).

James may be right, that neither an outside observer nor the subject him or herself completely understands how a religious idea or a set of ideas becomes “hot and alive,” but perhaps a precursor is that the idea was always there, but “peripheral” or dormant. Some evidence that inmates who turn to faith in prison start out with a religious foundation of some sort can be found in these field notes from a visit to the Reception Center Protestant service at CVP:

A visiting preacher gave the sermon to the Reception Center inmates. He was an 87 year-old white man from the Assemblies of God Church. He introduced himself and then immediately asked the inmate congregation, “How many of you never went to church when you were little?” Five inmates out of about 100 raised their hands. “The rest of you are backsliders!” said the preacher. “But did you ever forget it?” he continued, “I bet you didn’t. Do you know that Jesus is coming soon? Do you believe it?” The assembled men, who appeared mostly to be Latino, with about 25% of them black and perhaps 10 or 20 who were white, shouted out a few “Amens.” “Do you believe it?” the preacher repeated. More
Amens, louder this time. "Then don’t be so non-chalant about it!" (Field Notes 3/23/03)

So, if they were telling the truth, a full 95% of the inmates who had decided to go to the chapel that day had participated in a faith as children. In calling these men "backsliders," the preacher was not only reproaching the prisoners for having neglected their faith, he was also reminding them that they had once had faith, and that they could still believe. In rational choice terms, he was reminding them of the religious capital they had already invested in Christianity. Stark and Finke write:

Religious capital consists of the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture. (Stark and Finke 2000:120)

This Assemblies of God minister was appealing to the pre-existing religious familiarity that most of the inmates in that room had. Catholic lay minister, Roy McLean also acknowledges the religious background, or religious capital that most inmates he encounters already possess:

Most of the guys have some religious background but they’ve been in limbo for 16-25 years. They were raised with some religious teaching but from puberty on, close to zero. Once you’ve been baptized, you can’t be at zero, but as close to zero as you can get. The problem is it has never been developed. They haven’t been involved in their faith since they were little children. – Roy McLean

In their discussion of religious capital, Stark and Finke explain that people’s history of religious learning and practice (especially with others) give them a sense of attachment.

Over time these emotional bonds [that come from religious practice] tend to become intrinsic to one’s biography. Indeed...the effects of religious activities such as prayer, ritual, miracles, and mystical experiences build up over a lifetime, not only increasing confidence in the truth of a religion, but strengthening
emotional ties to a specific bundle of religious culture. (Stark and Finke 2000:120)

The rational choice concept of religious capital helps us understand that people make religious choices based, in part, on what they already know. In order for that knowledge not to be wasted, they may choose faith orientations that utilize some of the same tenets, storylines and principles of their earlier religious orientation. But, lest these theoretical musings become absurd, we should acknowledge here that actors do not comparison shop for religion, consciously choosing religion X over religion Y because they would prefer not to have to memorize a whole new set of prayers, for example. Rather, what makes sense about this theoretical concept is that people are generally more attracted to familiar things, and that a new religious program that is not entirely dissimilar to what they already know is likely to make more sense to them, since what makes sense to us is informed greatly by what we know.

*Christians Conserve Religious Capital*

Since most people have some faith history, and if people are attached to prior faith, it is not unexpected that every single Christian ex-convict interviewed for this study did have a Christian background, if only having attended when a small child. And many of them do reference Christian practices, characters, or symbols that were once “peripheral.”

Here Tommy Iglesias tells how he had been Catholic once, before falling off the path, and before finding it again in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ outside of the Catholic faith.
When I was younger I went to Catholic school. I got my first communion and I got all that other stuff, right? Then after that, I don’t know, I phased out. I phased out through getting involved, through seeing my dad do the wrong things, I just lost faith in God, you know? And I started saying to myself, “There ain’t no God. There ain’t no God. The only God out there for me is money and women.”

– Tommy Iglesias

Faith was also part of Jerome Ingles’s prior life, but at the time his Christian identity was too peripheral to prevent his involvement in drugs and violent crime. Below he compares calling oneself Christian with actually being a Christian.

I was a Christian in title. There’s being a Christian and there’s saying you’re a Christian and I hadn’t really become a Christian until I realized what being a Christian meant. And that’s dedicating your live and making some decisions that are absolutely contrary to being what you have been prior to that decision. So I became a Christian, but I had called myself a Christian for a long time... I got raised in a Christian home by Christian parents but I had no idea that that’s not what makes you a Christian until much later in life... And I, it was [at Bible study in prison] that for the first time I ever saw the Bible as more than just my grandmother’s book. – Jerome Ingles

For Jeffrey Curtis, Jesus was familiar before he ever went to prison, but, as it was for Tommy and Jerome, it was only in prison that he accepted Jesus as his personal savior, moving faith from the periphery to a central place.

I’d heard the name Jesus all of my life, but there was no relationship there, there was really no seed of faith there. – Jeffrey Curtis

Of the twelve Christian ex-felons interviewed, both Catholic and Protestant, ten were raised as Christians of some denomination. Two had attended church only as young children and thereafter not identified themselves as Christians until their experiences in prison. One of these two was Meredith Buchanan who describes her faith involvement as a child:

226
When I was really little and my Grandpa used to take me to [Methodist] church and then he died. Everybody said he went to heaven. See, he knew this God guy and I didn’t. I would go out into the field and I would pray to Grandpa. For a long time Grandpa was my Jesus, because I didn’t absorb enough in my little six year old head, in my several months of going to organized religion and Sunday school and such, I didn’t absorb enough to really understand it, but the seed had been planted. – Meredith Buchanan

The seed that was planted for Meredith through attending church with her grandfather could be termed as her “emotional ties to a specific bundle of culture.” We recall her saying in the second chapter that when she found herself looking into her spirituality she found her “link to Christianity stronger than any other.” Stark and Finke suggest that such emotional links make individuals less likely to switch faiths, so that the early religious affiliation of the Christian prison converts, even in Meredith’s case from when she was only six years old, helps lead them to Christianity when they find themselves searching (Stark and Finke 2000).

**Muslims Conserve Religious Capital**

But not all of the participants in this study turned to Christian faiths in prison. As we have reviewed above, many Islamic conversions happen in prison, and they happen, by and large, among individuals whose religious backgrounds are Christian. Among the nine Muslims who were interviewed (two imams, one volunteer and six ex-felons), eight had been raised as Christians, and one had been raised with a “strong faith in God” and a Christian-informed background (see notes on Abdul Haddad in Appendix 2).
According to recent theory by Stark and Finke, a religion that is similar to a person’s religious background (or allows a person to retain and continue to use what they know or are attached to) will be more attractive than one that has no similarities (Stark and Finke 2000). Stark and Finke give us very little to help explain when people defy this pattern and choose a set of religious doctrines that is dissimilar to their traditions. But what they do give us is a perspective that prompts us to look for how religious converts may see the familiar, even in their new faith.

Larry Poston discusses Khurram Jah Murad’s vision for a worldwide Islamic movement in *Islamic Da’wah in the West* (Murad is a Muslim of Indian/Pakistani decent who has studied and worked in England and the U.S. in *da’wah*). He writes that Murad’s first precept for *da’wah* for non-Muslims in the West is as follows:

> People are to be invited to ‘their own religion’ – the ‘oldest’ religion – and not to a ‘new religion.’ Says Murad: ‘Indeed...we may be bold enough to say that we do not invite anyone to change his ‘religion’, to transfer his allegiance to a rival religion.’ Here he is plainly advocating the view that Islam is din al-fitr – ‘the natural religion’ – which God has repeatedly revealed since Adam. In this sense Islam is not a new religion but rather represents a *restoration* of the one true religion. Judaism and Christianity in their original forms were precisely the same as the Muslim faith is today; alterations and accretions – both intentional and unintentional – made it necessary for God’s revelation to be renewed through Muhammad. (Poston 1992:84, emphasis original)

As we look at statements from Muslim participants, we see that they frame their Christian heritage in ways that emphasize both similarity and difference. Imam Mahmoud was raised a Roman Catholic himself, and does his *da’wah* in prisons and jails, among men and women who usually have a Christian background. As someone
who works in a religious vocation, the theory anticipates that he would emphasize the compatibility of the two traditions, which he does.

Fair-minded Christians, and others, will sit down and talk with Muslims and walk away with the impression that Islam is not that different from what they believe in. It is respectful of and complements what Christians believe in. One of the things that was easy for me to become a Muslim, because being raised Catholic, was that Islam does not reject Jesus, so that was something I didn’t have to deal with. A lot of Christians don’t know that. – Imam Mahmoud

Khadijah Perkins entered prison identified as a Christian, and converted to Islam in prison. Here she speaks of what is particularly valuable to her about Islam, but she speaks of this value in terms of her Christianity.

The difference [from Christianity] was mainly that fact that [in Islam] I wasn’t forgiven automatically for everything I had done in life that was wrong, that I knew was wrong. No one paid for my sins. The difference was I had to accept responsibility for my actions, and that made sense to me…and it made me want to strive to be a better person, and actually follow some of the values I grew up learning. Not just taking it for granted the values and principles I was raised to believe. In my Christian path I took a lot of it for granted because I was raised to believed that Jesus paid – died on the cross for my sins, so I didn’t have to pay for them. So I really believed that and I think that allowed me to do bad things, and think that I was OK still, I was still a good Christian. Islam taught me that I wasn’t a good Christian. And I would not be a good Muslim if I continued to do things that were against the law of the land, the law of humanity, and trying to do what’s right, what your heart tells you is right. We betray it sometimes…In Islam I am able to connect with those values [that I was raised with as a Christian]. – Khadijah Perkins

Stark and Finke write, “When people change churches or even religions, it is usually not because their preferences have changed, but because the new faith more effectively appeals to preferences they have always had (Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Sherkat 1997). Indeed, even when changes do occur in preferences, this is usually the consequence, rather than the cause, of variations in choice” (Stark and Finke 2000:86). For Khadijah, Islam taught her that she was a bad Christian. So she
referenced the lessons she learned in Islam to her Christian values, and found that Islam allowed her to live those (Christian) values better than Christianity did, “effectively appealing” to the preferences she “always had.” Jameelah once explained to her Christian grandmother who was confused about her grandchild’s conversion to Islam that “it’s all the same God, Big Mama.” She, like Khadijah, feels that Islam helps her to understand Christian tenets better than Christianity did. Even as she criticizes an important dimension of Christian faith, she relies on her Christian past to explain Islam’s value.

I never understood Christianity because I never understood the Trinity, which [is] the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. I never understood why I had to pray to Jesus. OK? Islam cleared up for me the misconceptions I had of the Holy Bible, OK? Because the Qur’an broke it down and explained to me whatever it is that I didn’t understand, there was always someplace that I could go to get it. You know, all my years of growing up in Christianity, when I would question and ask, “What’s the trinity? Why is God three in one?” I was just told, ‘Well, that’s the way it is, and that’s the way it supposed to be.” I never understood it. Islam just opened up. – Jameelah Haddad

Jameelah had always been troubled by the concept of the Holy Trinity, and part of what was beneficial about Islam was that it clarified this Christian concept for her. In religious capital terms, if religious knowledge is religious capital, not understanding the Trinity was like having capital with no practical value. Trading it in for Islamic explanations built on the capital she had, making it more valuable, but not requiring any sacrifice in her economy of religious capital. Interestingly, confusion or frustration with the concept of the Holy Trinity is not uncommon among Christians who embrace Islam. Larry Poston’s study of Islamic conversion in the West cites some converted Muslims who complain of the “irrationality” of the Trinity (Poston 1992:166), and Abdul Haddad says something along those lines as well.
It’s like, you know how, for instance, Christians, they believe in the Trinity, and they like to put a lot on man. It’s no way you can associate things that have been created with the creator. – Abdul Haddad

As Imam Mahmoud points out, many non-Muslims do not know that the Islamic canon includes the Old Testament and the New Testament, and that it recognizes all of the prophets from both books. But the commonalities shared by Christian and Islamic teachings are not lost on the Christian converts to Islam. Their Christian background, or religious capital, allows them to embrace a familiar God, while Islam gives them tools to criticize the inadequacies of their previous faith.

The fact that most inmates begin with a Christian orientation may, according to rational choice theory, incline them toward Christian faith if they find themselves moving toward faith at all in prison, but inmates who jump faith traditions by turning to Islam still find themselves in familiar territory, with many of the same tenets and characters, and with new ways to frame their past faith and why it might have failed to keep them out of prison. More to the point, though, many of the participants in this study do depict their spiritual experiences as something inside that lights up and gets hot like a fire, as James says. And for most it was more like fuel and wind ignited an ember that had gone all but totally dormant, rather than a flame setting off a previously untouched pile of brush. In other words, the spark is usually there before the individual lands in prison and has to contemplate the meaning of his or her life, face its bleakness and his or her guilt, before he or she meets the chaplain, inmate or volunteer who hands him or her the Bible or Qur’an that sets the fire. Abdul Haddad
says, “I always believed in God. It just didn’t hit me that way [until I went to prison]” (Interview 9/11/03).

But if the flame of faith can be reignited from its waning ember, perhaps it can also dwindle back down to warm ash from its smoldering peak. In the segments below, we will discuss how that sometimes happens, and we will hear from participants who have first-hand wisdom on the subject.

**“Phonies” and Jailhouse Religion**

In a certain sense, it all seems quite simple. Social disorder causes anomie, which causes crime. Religion facilitates social and moral integration and therefore not only should prevent future crime, but should actually cure the criminal of his or her anomie, egoism and alienation, thereby transforming him or her from a criminal offender to a law-abiding citizen. It makes sense, and is almost beautiful in its simple elegance as an explanatory model. It is, furthermore, supported by the data from the last chapter: whether they turned to Islam or Christianity while they were in prison, men and women in this study who embraced faith while incarcerated consistently claim that God saved them from the destructive path they were on, and bestowed upon them an unprecedented respect for humanity and for authority. This aspect of the religious ex-felon’s story is repeated case after case, with richness and, in spiritual terms, grace.

Looking at the nuances, however, we find that their stories do not simply confirm the common-sense model that religion is the antidote to criminal offending. They also
reflect factors that complicate the simple beauty of the functionalist model. We have already seen that among prisoners who attend religious services and programs in prison, only about 11% who are “devout” actually show lower recidivism. So what is going on with the other 89%? A possible way of interpreting the data is that religion itself doesn’t really work to keep people law-abiding. This was certainly the conclusion Travis Hirschi and Rodney Stark reached (Hirschi and Stark 1969). Stark and Bainbridge build on it in this excerpt, suggesting that faith is not enough, and may not even be the most salient aspect of religious involvement.

It seems likely that prison communities are, like the West Coast, lacking in organized religious participation. That being the case, variations in individual religiousness ought not influence moral behavior of prisoners unless they are embedded in a strong prison subculture rooted in common religious commitment. 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. Moreover, prison conversions will not have lasting influence unless persons retain or replace religious group support upon their release. (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:184)

Perhaps it is true that the extent to which a prisoner is embedded or immersed in the faith community has more of an influence on moral behavior than belief itself. But this still does not explain why for so many prisoners their faith does not lead them into a deep immersion in the religious prison subculture. We touched on possible reasons when we showed, through a rational choice analysis, that the faiths that are most popular in prison are also extremely costly for (male) participants. This is surely part of what is going on.

Another explanation is proffered by Harry Dammer who distinguishes between the “sincere” religious inmate and the “insincere.” According to his research, religious
involvement has an observable effect on behavior among the sincere, while such an effect is not observable among the insincere (Dammer 1992; Dammer 2002). This could logically account for why upon release from prison so many faith participants do not demonstrate, through lower recidivism rates, that religious involvement dissuaded them from their previous lifestyle. If one participates in religious activity in prison for utilitarian reasons, then presumably a complete surrender would be unlikely, no “transformation” would take place and the individual’s criminal inclinations would not be profoundly affected.

Dammer’s explanation is consistent with common perceptions of criminal offenders, but there is something about ascribing “insincere” motives to human behavior that doesn’t seem very sociological. The perceptions of this study’s participants in some ways confirm Dammer’s views, that not all prison chapel attendees are there for the same reasons. But listening closely to their stories, we discover that what appears as insincere may actually be a manifestation of a quiet internal conflict, one whose outcome even the prisoner cannot accurately predict. This finding reminds us as sociologists that imputing motivation to the behavior of the people we are studying is tricky, and may at times go beyond our domain. It also points to the fluid and changing nature of faith commitment.

“Insincere” Motives

According to some informants, there are indeed inmates who participate in faith programs with what Dammer calls “insincere” motives. Consistent with Dammer’s findings, these comments by the Director of Prisoner Services, the Assistant Warden,
and a Correctional Officer at CVP reflect some suspicion as to the real reasons some
inmates attend religious services.

You go to chapel every Sunday in here, but before you went to prison, you were
robbing the church – it brings up questions of commitment. – Jake Jacobs (Field
Notes 3/12/03)

The majority of people in prison will use the religious unlocks to gain privileges.
They provide a sanction to get away from other inmates. It’s a minority who are
ture to their faith. – Eduardo Sanchez (Field Notes 3/12/04)

I can’t tell you how many times inmates coming from church program come off
calling you everything they can think of. About 60% of them are just there [in
church] trying to impress the parole board that they are trying to change. Maybe
15%-20% are sincere. But we’ve still got 90% recidivism. They take up church
while they’re here, and then they leave it when they leave...We’ve had so many
incidents in church among Reception Center inmates. They’re mostly going to
church to get out of their cells, socialize, get tobacco, like that. Among mainline
inmates, 15%-20% leave CVP and try to keep God in their life. They may be
trying hard, but go back to the same location and breakdown with guys they used
to know in the streets. – CVP Correctional Officer (Field Notes 3/12/03)

While the Assistant Warden felt comfortable saying that “the majority” of prisoners
attending services are not “true to their faith,” the CO was more specific, estimating
an actual figure of 60% who are insincere, with 15-20% making an authentic effort.

Perhaps expectedly, Bill Jensen with PFM was more generous in his estimations.

They initially come to Bible studies for different reasons...Guys are being locked
up all day - some come just to get out of their cells. Others come because they
have a need, they want it...but I would say that probably 80% that attend the
meetings are there because they want to – they have a genuine need to have a
relationship with Jesus Christ...Some come just to be in a group of other people.
– Bill Jensen

Even with such a high estimate of sincere participants, Bill Jensen feels it necessary
to acknowledge the phenomenon of inmates with motives that are not exactly
religious. Some of the former felons themselves spoke of such motives. In the introduction Bill Roberts confessed that he began attending Bible study initially just to get out of his cell. And, below, Shane Johnston, a former felon who now works as a pastor in the Assemblies of God church, says that his first foray into the prison chapel was to curry parole board favor.

So I knew that eventually I would go up to this release board and I was going to have to show them that I was ready to go home. So I thought, they think I have an alcohol problem. So I went to AA. And this guy stood up at AA and he said something to the effect of, “Hi, my name is so-and-so and I’m an alcoholic.” And I remember thinking, “That guy’s an idiot. There ain’t no way on God’s green earth that I’d let everybody in a room know what my problem were.” So I didn’t want to go there anymore. So then I thought, well I got a drug problem, they think I have one, so I went to NA...and this guy stood up in the NA program and said “Hi, my name is so-and-so and I have a drug problem,” and I thought to myself, “Man, you ought to get together with the wino!...[You could] talk about your problems and stuff.” I just couldn’t – I just didn’t like it. Then I went to church, I thought, “Let me try God.” I went to church and this guy stands up and said, “I’m a sinner. I need God.” And I just thought, you know, you guys are a bunch of wimps. – Shane Johnston

Abdul Haddad had a similarly utilitarian motivation the first few times he attended Muslim service in prison.

When I embraced Islam it was during the time I was incarcerated in federal prison in Texas, Fort Worth. Really, I went there, started going to the service because when you go to the service you get off work. From me going and listening, and then when I read interpretations of Qur’an, this is when it really grabbed me. – Abdul Haddad

We recall earlier findings, that many of the presumably sincere ex-felons in our study, whose “sincerity” has been authenticated by their own pastors, originally turned to God and organized religion out of isolation and fear of a dauntingly long sentence. If these seemingly insincere motives are common among the sincerely religious inmates, this disrupts Dammer’s dichotomous categorization. We note that
eventually Bill Roberts, Shane Johnston and Abdul Haddad all began to see internal rewards to involvement in the faith, and reframed their motives completely.

Psychologist Leon Salzman classifies a certain type of religious conversion as progressive and another as psycho-pathological. The latter generally occurs in people with pre-existing psychological problems, and rather than solving their problems, religious conversion of this type serves only as a *pseudo solution*. It comes on quickly and is characterized by zealous proselytization, among other things. It may provide short-term relief from the psychological problems from which the convert suffers, but it likely to exacerbate them (Salzman 1953). Salzman’s conclusions about this kind of religious conversion, often associated with Christian evangelical tent meetings, would provide another potential explanation for why religion doesn’t stick for many prisoners. This is not exactly the same as calling a prisoner’s religious commitment insincere, but it has similar implications. Below, Father Flannigan, who worked as a Catholic prison chaplain for twenty years, seems to lend Salzman some credence.

I’m not saying [it’s insincere]. I’m just saying, well, what happens is a lot of times when the guys get out, that goes by the wayside. You know, for being in prison, whatever helps you make it through the day. I’m not saying it’s insincerity. I might do the same thing myself if I were locked up. But it gives the guys some sort of support. And that’s great. They’re able to cope. No, I wouldn’t accuse them of insincerity... I’d say – prison is a place you’re forced into because you’ve committed a felony. It’s a kind of awkward comparison as to how one lives one’s spiritual life after being caught with the goods, you know, and you’ve got to do time for the crime. I guess some guys do better [while they’re inside than while they’re out], but so many don’t get involved in religion. You know, they get in there, they just do their time. And some while in there do get some sort of religious fervor, which is basically a Fundamentalist kind of thing. The guy you’re kind of dealing with is a guy that pretty much reads at a 3rd grade level and does math at a 3rd grade level, and somebody introduces him to the
Bible and in a short time they’re out preaching it and so on, and it’s a kind of a misunderstanding of the Bible, I think, for many of them. The Bible is like Organic Chemistry. You really gotta study it...It’s a tough thing to fathom. It’s not always obviously clear. And here you got these guys with enthusiasm getting involved in the Bible and they get a few scriptures, six or seven of them. Like the guy standing on the street corner, they know about seven scriptures and that sustains them and they want to share it with other people. I don’t’ know how you would describe that type of fundamentalism other than it is an answer to whatever problem you have and I think that’s what you’re dealing with with some of these fundamentalists and as a result with some of the cons. – Father Flannigan

Later, Father Flannigan talks more about religion for some not as a real solution, but as a mere proxy for drugs. He also refers to the question of sincerity.

You could go into San Quentin today and there would be any number of guys carrying around a Bible and preaching Jesus’ message, which seems to lack some reality not only in prison, but out here. You know, if you meet somebody like that at 24th and Mission, or at 24th and Ortega you know, you kind of walk around them. And the same thing is true at [the prison]. So there’s a certain number of guys that are kind of involved in that that I think are doing it seemingly to me because of the abundance of narcotics in these guys’ lives. So many of them have been on dope, this is their new dope. And of course it’s better, talking religion than talking dope, but there’s some sort of anomaly to that sort of attitude, I think. Secondly, on a person doing an investigation of religious sentiments among ex-cons, you really have to, in a sense, I don’t know how to say this, verify the authenticity of the con. Cause a guy will tell you whatever you want to hear or thinks you want to hear...[You can only know their sincerity] After you get to know somebody, and it takes a little time. – Father Flannigan

Another Catholic, this one a former felon who converted to Catholicism while in prison, observes something in prison similar to what Father Flannigan discusses.

A lot of people use [religion in prison] as a crutch, something to hide behind. I specifically set goals while incarcerated...I had no desire to become a religious zealot like some of the people there.

I have no desire to become a religious zealot: There are people in the prison who get so wrapped up in religious belief that it controls all their actions. They become totally consumed and controlled by religion to the point where it was almost like they had gone insane and that was their life. One gentleman, a murderer, when you’d ask him, ‘how are you doing?’ he’d say ‘I’m blessed.’ Stuck in this hole in the world, and you say you’re blessed? I have no problem with that, but he would proselytize. It was excessive. You don’t need to tell the
whole world your beliefs, it's enough that you believe. Actions speak louder than words. If I was incarcerated with no hope of getting out, I would look for something, too—a crutch to help me walk. In a lot of cases that's what it was. But it shouldn't be a crutch. Of course you take what you can find, because there's a whole lot of nothing in prison and you could do a lot worse. I just didn't like the people who were so in your face, telling you to believe the way they believed. Let God make that determination. —David Ringer

This is a common enough criticism of Evangelical Christians from a Roman Catholic perspective. The Catholic approach is that the Bible is somewhat abstruse and that its interpretation should be guided by a priest. This distinctive viewpoint should be taken into consideration when we consider these statements. But, in the face of testimony that some of the people we are studying are pathological or insincere, we are in something of a quandary. Is it our place as social scientists to judge if a religious commitment is only a "pseudo-solution" or "insincere?" In the setting of the prison, it is impossible to completely sidestep the question of false or at least insufficient faith because it comes up in statements like those of the CVP personnel and Father Flannigan. It also comes up in everyday conversations on the topic. The common perception seems to be that prison inmates are manipulative and disingenuous, and that colors how people see "jailhouse conversions." Their motives for involvement fall under close scrutiny. However, if we subscribe to the rational choice approach to religion, and we believe that actors weigh costs and benefits in making religious choices, then we must necessarily see all religious involvement as utilitarian. This casts a different hue to inmate motives for religious participation. With this view even going to church just to get out of one's cell appears less wanton.
**Jailhouse Religion**

Former inmates present thoughts on the subject as well. According to these Christian ex-felons, there are those that go to chapel who are insincere, but the phonies aren’t fooling anyone.

> Yeah, there’s jailhouse conversions, the guys that shout Halleluiah and five minutes later they’re out drinking the hooch out behind the gym or whatever. And you can see it a mile away. The Bible says, Jesus says, ‘there’ll be those that say Lord Lord, but I bid them not.’ He knew it, too. He could see them coming a mile away. But for those that even give God a chance, I have seen so much difference. — Jeffrey Curtis

People assume – there’s a stereotype that says prison conversions aren’t really real because they’re just trying to get out of prison by being saved. I don’t know where people get that from. Guards aren’t fooled. Inmates aren’t fooled. Nobody is fooled by that. Oh, I go to church now, so I can convince the warden or guards that I’m a Christian now? You can only do that with behavior. You cannot do that just by going to that chapel. Because none of them really believe you anyway, just because you’re going to the chapel. It takes years of proving who you are as a Christian before inmates and officers are convinced that this is something that really has happened to this guy. It took years for that to happen. — Jerome Ingles

Along with Jerome and Jeffrey, several other of the ex-felons acknowledge the phenomenon of inmates who “just go to chapel,” in prison and either cannot take it back onto the yard, or once they are released do not maintain their faith involvement.

The Correctional Officer quoted above found that when inmates “leave it when they leave,” it is proof that they were not sincere in their church involvement. At the same time he acknowledged that inmates who are released may be “trying hard,” but re-offend nevertheless. As we discussed earlier, there are specific costs and benefits associated with religion in prison. Perhaps, then, it should not be unexpected that
when inmates leave the setting of the prison, those costs and benefits are replaced by a different equation, and consequently they do not stay involved in the same way.

Stark and Bainbridge posit that religious indoctrination in prison is only as effective as the post-release follow-up provided by that faith group, ensuring "constant relevance and reference during everyday interactions" (Stark and Bainbridge 1996). Chaplains and former inmates alike have stories about those felons whose transformations weren't complete, who are in prison today, or dead. Many of these, for the felons themselves, were close friends with whom they had walked in a spiritual path while they were in prison together.

Unlike Jerome and Jeffrey who saw insincere chapel attendees as transparently so, Shane Johnston wasn't trying to discern that. He reminisces about an old friend:

> Jimmy, we were in prison together. We called him Crazy Jimmy. Jimmy, we all went to church together, made commitments to Jesus about the same time. Jimmy got out. ...Jimmy is awaiting execution for killing two old people in Bakersfield...He had made a commitment [to Jesus] when we were all together, we all of us made commitments, and um, I don't know what happened. We used to call him Crazy Jimmy – that was his moniker. And he got out and he just kind of lived up to it...A whole group of us made commitments to Jesus, um...Some people make commitments in prison, Moira, for different reasons. Some people joined the Christian faith because they were kind of young, good looking, and they joined us because they knew that - and in a sense - we were ourselves like a gang. But we weren't a violent gang, do you understand? You know from a sociological perspective, we were just a group of us who hung out together, and if needed be, we would defend each other, so from that interpretation, we were a gang. We would look out for each other. So some guys didn't want to join...the Black Muslims or the Black Gorilla Family (or the BGF) or the Mexican Mafia, so they would become Christians. But we couldn't tell, and we weren't trying to tell. We were just trying to be friends to everybody, love them, help them be more Christ-like. – Shane Johnston
David Ringer also had a crazy friend with whom he attended chapel in prison who has since fallen.

Another friend [who I used to go to church with in prison] was a little wilder. He’s now in federal custody. I’d like to help him. When he first got out I took him to a half way house – legally, this was in violation of his parole. He did well until this last summer when he got involved in methamphetamine. – David Ringer

Sandra Pacheco’s husband got clean and became a Christian while he was in prison.

Sandra was also incarcerated at the time and it was, in part, because of his letters that she decided to try it herself. Here, however, she describes that even though he was the first to embrace Christ, his resolve was not strong enough while hers was.

[My husband] had to relapse and go back to prison one more time, but I didn’t. His path was a little different from mine. We didn’t actually move back in together until I was two years clean. My sobriety came first. You know, it started out to be for him but within the first thirty days it changed – it was for me. – Sandra Pacheco

Dan Tucker had dabbled in Christian faith before his incarceration, and describes how for some, including himself, it doesn’t always stick.

When I was in my 20’s starting to get into the heroin era, hanging out with biker guys, a bunch of them started going to Bible study…So there was this little flare-up of [Pentecostal] Christianity. Some of them stayed with it and some didn’t. I was one of the ones that didn’t. Another guy that was a real good friend of mine that was involved in this at the time, he’s serving a life sentence for murder right now. He’s AB at Pelican Bay. I mean it didn’t stick for everybody. But you know I know that the guy still has a sense of God that he’s never going to be able to shake for the rest of his life. – Dan Tucker

Then Dan went to prison and was saved. But after being released, he slipped back into the lifestyle that got him in trouble, and he was re-arrested, where he was saved
again. Here he describes the yo-yoing and offers something of an explanation as he does so.

I've reverted to drug and alcohol use and been just as wild as I could be [between release from prison in 1978 and 1994]. There were times in there when I was back at church like a fully-functioning Christian. And then I'd just drift back. I never really stopped having conversations with God. I – my dad was a weak man, and he was a hard man. But he was very weak in certain areas of his life. I had no idea what a father really was – my dad didn't desert me... He was just a miserable old fart. He was raised in a fundamentalist kind of Christian home, but his dad was a real flake... My dad was dirt poor... didn't know how to live, didn't know how to raise us... I wasn't raised to understand what my capabilities were or to have a track record of completing things. I have a real unfinished life. And, it has kind of haunted me, all my life. – Dan Tucker

Shane Johnston also had tried in the past to commit himself to God, but had not succeeded.

I mean I had prayed, “Oh God I want to quit smoking” I did a whole lot of praying when I was drinking alcohol, every weekend I was talking to God with my face in the toilet bowl, asking him to help me get over this and if he did I wouldn't do it again. But that wasn't real. – Shane Johnston

For faith to ensure law abidance is clearly more complicated than simple exposure to a resonant spiritual message. If we listen more closely to the witnesses to the phenomenon of insincere religion, and try to understand their perspective, there is little that smacks of manipulation or falseness. Rather, the stories are of human and spiritual frailty.

One of the participants whose spiritual devotion and criminal record were most inconsistent was Fernando Vega. Fernando was one of the two ex-felons in the study who was not recommended by someone active in the faith. Rather, he approached me at a service in prison where I had been introduced, and offered to interview with me
after his release in a few days. He was far less settled in his post-release life than the other participants were, and some of this is reflected in his comments. He offers some thoughts on phony commitment, on prison conditions, and on his own struggle to be truly faithful.

[The people I hung out with in prison were] not religious people. I couldn’t to figure them going to church. There were people who went to church, but they were phony. I remember a lot of people who would go to church just to hide. They used to hide from reality. That’s so they wouldn’t have to face what was going on inside the prison. The activities – gang activities – they used to go to church to get away from all that. At the same time they want to play along with it. They want to be a part of it. But when the shit comes down, they gonna go to church right away. It don’t work that way. They didn’t believe in God; they were scared. I only met a handful of person that were truly believers in God. But even them, I didn’t put nothing past them. Because there are people who can play the part real good.

Fernando did not change his community when he embraced faith in prison. He did not find the ‘brotherhood’ that Jeffrey and some of the others refer to. He went to Catholic chapel, even though he didn’t consider himself a Catholic anymore, because of his relationship with the Catholic chaplain, “but not every week.” And he did not immerse himself in the chapel community in prison, making it all the more difficult to resist the lifestyle.

In prison temptation is everywhere, in every hallway, every corner. It didn’t make it no easier, it made it worse. That’s when you learn what kind of will-power you have. Usually, at the end you lose, you give in. You say, “OK, God I believe! I’m gonna go straight!” and stuff like that, then comes a homeboy coming around the corner, he has magazine, dope, you give in. What you read just then, it’s out the window. The devil is everywhere in prison, everywhere...Drugs, prostitution, gang activity. The cops play along with it, the female cops go along with it too. There’s prostitution in there. There’s all kinds of stuff...The whole state of California knows that [female correctional officers engage in prostitution]. You go to San Quentin, Solano, Achape, everywhere. And they don’t charge cheap, either!
Fernando laughs at the last statement, as if to imply that he knew first-hand.

Fernando is now out of prison and attending church regularly. He is hopeful about his future, but not entirely sure that he can resist violence if certain situations present themselves.

I don’t think I’ll get arrested again. I’m afraid sometimes. I see a cop and he’s going to be jealous, any kind of reason he might get mad. If I’m put to the corner, I’m not going to hesitate to take one of them out, because I know they’re not going to hesitate to take me out. But for the meantime, I’m out. I know where I am…It’s sad because I’m smart in so many different features, but I let little things bother me and I blow up. And I shouldn’t. I try to blame it on my environment, or the lock-up unit, all these riots, that kind of stuff. But that’s only an excuse, it’s a cop-out.

Fernando started reading the Bible seriously in 1981 when he was incarcerated, and has since served several more sentences in prison. He believes he has begun a new path, but fears that circumstances will repeat in his life and that he will end up back in prison. He is 47 years old and has spent nearly 30 years incarcerated; he entered CYA when he was 12 and a half for shooting a police officer, so since he was 12 he has spent a total of about five years out of prison. During those years of incarceration, he has spent a fair amount of time praying, and believes himself to have escaped the superficial life that provides temptation.

I had seen a lot of people that I knew as a kid, they don’t know nothing about religion, about God. They don’t know anything of where they’re going where they’re coming or anything whatsoever. They’re blind. All they know is money, their car…They don’t understand, they’re not going to take that with them. The way you come to this world is the way you going to go out. Naked…Reading the Bible changed me because I realize what I had ahead of me…I don’t have to accomplish anything in this world. The only thing I have to accomplish is to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as my savior. That’s the only way I’m going to make it up there [points up]. I have nothing, everything I had I lost. I know how to be rich, I know how to be poor. I don’t care about it no more. I’d rather be with nothing as long as I have what is inside my heart. That’s what makes me rich.
Fernando speaks as though his value system has really changed this time. But he also knows what it was like to live a contradiction.

I myself at one time was a phony, too. I used to be in the religion, when I was in prison I used to go to these Christian churches pretending to be something I was not. Because when I used to go to these meetings and stuff I would do it just to get away from the people around me...I also went to see what I would feel at the time, too, to see if there was any kind of spark. I tried to feel differently because of the prayer, the singing. But deeply inside the heart, it was phony. Out here it's different because what I have gained all these years, all that knowledge, I actually feel different. I'm not 100% or 80% religious or anything. But I have my faith inside of me. As long as I have it inside of me, that's all that matters. If I was like before I would want money, I would want cars...Now I don't care no more. I feel comfortable the way I am right now. Having all these other luxuries just brings problems. Once you have one luxury, you want another luxury...Believe me I was a big spender, especially in clothes, gold, watches, stuff like that...I'm not like that no more. All I care about is my bike, and the wind hitting me. That's how I know I'm free. When I drive my bike I'm driving with my God, free... God had always been there, I was just too blind to see. From the day I walked in [to CYA]...He was there for me all that time. I just never knew Him. I didn't knew him. All that time, being 12 and a half through 47, He was there for me. He got me through battles, He picked me up from riots, being locked down, being kicked, being stabbed. He was there for me, and, you know what? I realize that now. Before I never did...It all has to do with what I asked Him [for]: knowledge, wisdom and understanding...There's a lot of temptation out here, worse. A lot worse. I stay at home. I remodel my mom's house, that's how I keep myself busy. Look what I'm doing right now, drinking a beer, that's temptation right here. I'm not even supposed to drink, and here I am, I already drank two glasses. That's temptation right there. I even realize what I'm doing. I guess it's OK because I'm talking about God, because God knows, He knows I need to feel relaxed. That's the way I look at it, I don't know how He looks at it up there! [laughs] He's going like this, "Yeah, OK, that's a good one." Anyway, I'm all right I guess. I'll tell you one thing, though, I'm being more honest now than I ever have been before...And that's hard. That's a temptation, too. I'm in a lot of situations where I could take advantage of people. But I don't. - Fernando Vega

At the time that I interviewed him, Fernando had been out of prison for about a month. But even when he was a "phony" he would go to chapel to see if there was any kind of "spark." He was searching and apparently struggling. His criminal history, and his continued fear that he will re-offend if "cornered" by a police officer
demonstrate that he is not always on the winning end of his struggle. But to call his efforts insincere would be an unjust oversimplification.

Another of the participants who continues to struggle is Tommy Iglesias, who was in a drug rehab program when I interviewed him. He was introduced to me by a friend, rather than through a priest or church member. Below he describes his own struggle to change. He was born again in prison, but did not immerse himself in a religious prison subculture, as Stark and Bainbridge suggest is what is correlated to success. He began to practice more diligently during his subsequent sentence, after which he fell back into drug abuse. Like Fernando, he is optimistic about his current direction, but expresses some shame for his inability to stay true to his faith.

It’s a hard thing because I make it hard. There’s a whole lot of me that says yes, to doing the right thing, but there’s just that little bit, you know? And I’m working on that. I find myself having to do the right thing. My first jail sentence I was high the whole time – 1986 to 1992. And then I went back in 92, from 92 to 96. And that’s where I started walking with Christ... I’ve been knowing Christ ever since 1986. I was born again in 1986, but, see, it’s hard to change. It’s hard to change when you rely on yourself. It’s hard to build trust. It’s hard to trust in God, I’m telling you. There’s a scripture that says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy path.” He doesn’t want half you heart – He wants the whole thing... I’ve been out of prison since 1999. I’ve kind of been in another prison and that’s with the drugs off and on... I fell back into my addictions and I stopped going to church. I was hiding from God. Through not being committed like I should there’s an embarrassment that goes with this. I’m haunted by the things – I sold out. I feel like I’ve sold out so many times. And I know God’s there and I know he’s in charge. And I’ve got to, I’ve got to submit myself... Along with sobriety things get better, too. – Tommy Iglesias

Tommy and Fernando did not fall back down after their time in prison because their religious commitment was just a front presented for parole board favor, nor were they simply going to services to get out of their cells or obtain tobacco. They, and Dan
Tucker, Shane Johnston, Sandra Pacheco's husband, Crazy Jimmy and the others fell subject to a weakness in their resolve. That weakness could not withstand the pressure that appears particularly severe after release.

The testimonies above are all from Christians, but they are not the only participants whose resolve in their faith wavers. Below Jameelah Haddad talks about her struggles.

I took my *shahadah* in 1997... I went back to prison in 1998... I'm still working on – I'm still struggling. It's a lot of things I'm working on right now. A lot of things. Like, just being humble, making *salat*, you know, the prayer that's required five times ad day. Some of my worldly desires, you know. It's a struggle; it's a *jihad*... When you stray from the path, you know you're doing wrong, and Islam teaches us we gotta answer for that. – Jameelah Haddad

Like Jameelah, Ali Hasan had already taken *shahadah* in prison when he was released and recommitted to prison. He accepted Islam in 1985 but continued to go in and out of prison between 1984 and 1994, mostly in. Despite his continued entanglement with the law, and the contradiction it presented, he never stopped thinking of himself as a Muslim, and eventually it “stuck.”

I considered myself a Muslim the whole time. There were four years of not going to jail [laughs] and I think that had something to do with it. Definitely. And that was another thing that, some reasoning behind my thinking because I had to, at some point, make that connection. And I know that involved prison. At some point between 84 and 94 and being introduced to the Islamic faith that I had to make that true connection because I knew that spiritually it didn’t involve me being in prison and continuing to be a part of that cycle of going to prison. At some point it was either to walk this way or that way. I submitted and accepted that my understanding of how to live life wasn’t right. It was incorrect. I grew with my understanding to make better decisions. – Ali Hasan
Abdul Haddad was exposed to and practiced Islam in prison, but hesitated to take
*shahadah* because he knew he would go back into his old life when he was released.

Even though I was a narcotic offender, I was true to it. You know, like they say, true to the game. No tricks, no nothing. When I came home the first time, I didn’t want that to reflect on Islam, so I didn’t take *shahadah*. I didn’t want that to reflect, you know, me coming out here, getting back into my profession. – Abdul Haddad

Similarly, Ja’far Saadiq was reluctant to adopt Islam while he was involved in drugs and crime, even though he was attracted to the faith. In the passage below he tells how his behavior was not worthy of the faith.

I knew the drinking and the drugs was bad, but I didn’t have the will or the discipline to stop. I was caught up. I was attracted to Islam, but I was also afraid to be involved, with the contradictory behavior that I had. I was nothing near religious. I didn’t want to come into any religious involvement while I was addicted to drugs and alcohol. It was kind of like a war going on inside of me. A struggle with for a better path…I was attracted to it, because I saw it as a way to improve myself and it gave me a hope for a better future. But I was really submerged in the drug culture. That’s what I did, the drug culture. And then on top of that, the criminal activity to support my drug habit, I would repeatedly commit petty crimes, that eventually led to serious crimes and ended up on prison on death row. – Ja’far Saadiq

These data show that the Muslim participants also slipped in their commitment and struggle to act consistently true to their faith. Like the Christian participants, these Muslims appear to be sincere in their struggle, even when they fail. Although when their failure results in another prison term, they would fall into the category of the insincere inmate by Dammer and by prison personnel. So rather than calling the involvement that does not result in permanent and unaltering devotion to every principle of a faith, “insincere,” perhaps it would be more accurate to call their early attempts “false starts.” Since we know that the majority of the ex-felons in this study
who tell stories of backsliding eventually found their way to a more durable faith involvement, we can see that what appears to be insincerity might just be, for many, an early moment in their spiritual and personal journey.

Furthermore, backsliding is a relatively common occurrence in religious conversion, regardless of criminal involvement. William James writes in 1892 in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,

> The only statistics I know of, on the subject of the duration of conversions, are those collected for Professor Starbuck by Miss Johnson. They embrace only a hundred persons, evangelical church-members, more than half being Methodists. According to the statement of the subjects themselves, there had been backsliding of some sort in nearly all the cases, 93 per cent. of the women, 77 per cent. of the men. Discussing the returns more minutely, Starbuck finds that only 6 per cent. are relapses from the religious faith which the conversion confirmed, and that backsliding complained of is in most only a fluctuation in the ardor of sentiment. (James 1982:257-258)

James does not provide further discussion of this gender difference or any analysis of gender in the rest of the book. But the point is made that religious commitment wavers. Because the people being studied here wear the yoke of criminal offender and its accompanying prejudices, they are subject to a higher level of scrutiny than your average religious convert might be.

This is not to suggest that criminal offenders who embrace faith are not faced with a distinct set of challenges, different from those of other people who convert. At the very least, when they are released from prison they are in a dramatically different environment from where they were when they committed. The new environment has different benefits and different difficulties.
Why Backsliding Accompanies Release

If, as the theorists reviewed earlier uniformly posit, crisis can prompt spiritual searching, then we ought to expect the moment of release from prison to result in spiritual change, just as the moment of incarceration would, since each moment presents the individual with a crisis. But very little of the research on religion and prisoners acknowledges the crisis faced by returning felons. An important piece of research that does recognize the challenge of reentry, but is not about faith per se, is Shadd Maruna's *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives* (Maruna 2001). Here, the commonality of backsliding from resolutions of crime desistence is emphasized, an acknowledgement that helps contextualize the faltering faith commitments that appear to be equally common upon release.

In this next section, we hear from study participants who describe the challenges they faced as they returned from prison to life on the outside. Some of the challenges were practical hurdles to their faith practices, some were temptations that threatened their moral resolve, and some were simply the unreasonable obstacles with which returning felons are all faced. Some of our participants met these challenges more successfully than others, providing further evidence that faith fluctuates.

*Life Gets in the Way*

According to our participants, part of the reason for backsliding, or at least reduced commitment when one is released, is simply the practical reality of their lives interfering with their practice.
Here Bill Roberts says that his life got busier when he was released and that made faithful practice more difficult.

...[When I was released, my involvement in my faith] suffered. Yes. I did not renounce anything, but my involvement in Bible studies, my personal time in the Word, my prayer life dramatically decreased. And that was, I'm sure, a direct result of all of a sudden having every hour filled with something different. For the longest time there was only a couple of things to do: get up, eat, go to the prison work force, go to the library, go back to the cell and at lock-down, study the Word. So there was a program I was able to follow. And I was able to set aside – the time was there to study and to pray. And I did. But when I came out there was so much going on. Well, I had to drive to work for one thing... I got to deal with people on the road and they're pissing me off. I was losing some of my composure. It was disheartening in a sense because I knew what was happening. I had a better attitude in prison than I did when I came out! But then I hadn’t been in the world very long and I had a lot to learn because I came out to a completely different set up than the one that I left. Because I was a completely different person that the one that went in. – Bill Roberts

Tommy Iglesias says something similar.

Now I’m out here and this is reality. I’m out and I’m in society. Now I can’t spend as much time as I used to in the presence of God... – Tommy Iglesias

For Nick McDonnell life inside happened largely in the chapel. Outside of prison was different, and was located outside of the chapel.

I was intensely involved in the inside I was one of the guys that was organizing every feature of program that we could create, evening programs five or six days a week in prison...[When I got out] at first it was very exciting to go to a big church with stained glass windows and all that. That’s great. But figuring out how I could show up in the community as an ex-con who didn’t necessarily front himself off as an ex con – I’ve had to be very careful about that – has been a challenge. And then of course my life got busy as I got a job and I got a girlfriend... The ways of the world account for a great deal of distraction from the faith if one is not mindful. – Nick McDonnell

Muslim participants also find that the simple ins and outs of daily life in society interfere with the kind of practice they used to observe in prison. Maryam Sabree
who volunteers in prisons discusses the lack of male Muslim volunteers. The men
who are interested in doing da’wah are often ex-inmates themselves whose
commitment to volunteer services drops off as life gets busier.

One of the things that I’ve found is that some of the men were ex-inmates
themselves and they would go in to support them, but through their lives and
marriages, families, they’re just doing different things. The only time I hear of
people wanting to go out [to the prisons] is during the Eid times. Or during
Ramadan, you’ll see people wanting to give that extra charity that I’m talking
about. The other days of the year they don’t come out as much. – Maryam Sabree

Abdul Haddad confirms Maryam’s impression that life gets too busy to keep the
deen. In prison, there is simply more time.

I pray less often now, and a lot of times I have to make up prayers. Like right
now, I would be making thur, and after that at four – it’s kind of hard, at times I
might have to make up three or four prayers all at once. In prison it’s a different
kind of setting where it’s easy. Out here a lot of places, for instance, a lot of the
Muslim brothers that I talk to, you know, because of their jobs – you know here
you don’t have workplaces that accommodate that...That become a hardship on a
lot of Muslims. You can make up your prayers... I find myself reading less now,
out here, than when I was in prison... Sometimes my time don’t allow me to
make time to make it to a mosque. – Abdul Haddad

Ja’far Saadiq also practices differently now because he has a family.

There was special prayer that I prayed all the time that I was in prison. I pray it
now, sometimes, but not always. But in there I prayed it all the time. And it’s a
prayer called Tahajjud, and it’s a prayer you say in the middle of the night, after
midnight. And I used to get up every morning, and it’s for spiritual benefit. My
life circumstances are different now...so I don’t say it as much now. My family
has rights over me now. [laughs] – Ja’far Saadiq

Ja’far Saadiq is an imam now, however, and has enough time to make his five daily
prayers. Some of the other Muslim participants have secular jobs that sometimes take
precedence over their spiritual obligations.
I prayed more in prison [than I do out here], because I didn’t have staff meetings to go to, school to go to. You know, in prison you had a lot of laid-back time. Some days I might make my prayers, and some days I might not do them at all. Sometimes, with working two jobs and going to school; sometimes I’ll be beat. Sometimes I have to make myself. If Allah can give me the strength, then I can do it. You know, and I have to think that more often... You got to practice it more out here, on the streets than you do in there, because this is real out here. This is where all the trials and tribulations come, right out here. – Jameelah Haddad

Here Jameelah touches on another difference between life in prison and life on the outside: there are more trials and tribulations out here.

_Temptation Abounds_

Life inside, while horribly challenging in many ways, doesn’t present the same kind of challenge that life outside does. Reverend Roger Ruskin has been working with prisoners for nearly twenty years and he confirms the findings of earlier studies that inmates who are deeply involved in faith programs avoid recidivism better. But he has also observed that it is generally easier for inmates to remain faithful to the principles of Christianity while they are inside because life outside is just more complicated.

In here, you only make about 12 decisions a day. Out there you make at least 150 decisions a day. That’s why our programs teach critical thinking. [Our programs try to] bring them to understanding that others are human beings...from worthless to being a person of priceless worth because you’re a human...[Among] the guys who complete over 200 hours of Christian education, I haven’t seen a failure. The guys who are inconsistent continue that same behavior...It’s a matter of internalizing it...I hate to say this, and I would never say it in front of the guys, but some people will be at their best in prison...speaking in terms of Christianity – Rev. Roger Ruskin

Elaine Murray, a Catholic layperson who ministers to inmates, also says that people doing time are more willing to do the work than are people who are not in prison.
“There are repeat guys who have tried but have gone back to prison.” She has seen this particularly in those who have addiction issues. She does not, however, question their sincerity, indicating that “good intentions” are overwhelmed by problems of drugs and being “economically behind.” She also cites the problem of misunderstood spirituality – that going to church solves everything (Field Notes 6/2/03).

Jerome Ingles, who spent the better part of his first 20 adult years incarcerated, is now a Non-denominational Christian minister and lends an inmate perspective to the sentiment that Reverend Ruskin and Elaine Murray express above. Outside, one’s behavior is not closely watched by one’s Christian community, so it’s easier to succumb to temptation.

Out here in the world, it’s easy to become a Christian, but it’s difficult to be one... The difficulty in being a Christian out here, is that there’s so much temptation that you can get away with that nobody knows about... You can go right over here and smoke some dope, and the people at church would never know... It’s difficult to be a Christian out here... as opposed to in there, it’s easy to be a Christian because you can’t do anything else. Once you become a Christian, there’s nothing else to do. There’s nothing else to do. – Jerome Ingles

Abdul Haddad concurs that temptations are more plentiful on the outside.

It’s harder to – a lot harder, because being out here there’s temptations you run into. A lot harder to me, from being on the inside. A lot of things on the inside you don’t get tempted with, where you do out here. – Abdul Haddad

At Bible study at CVP, Ray, a white inmate in his late 20’s discussed his recent re-entry to prison. Back in prison and “back into God,” Ray embodies Reverend Ruskin’s point.

I was saved 16 months ago when I was here at CVP. I had been searching for the Lord for three years while our lives were going downhill. After I got locked up,
my marriage ended. When I got out, I got back into my addiction, and ended up back at CVP [two months ago], and here I am back into God. Last time I got out I thought I could stand. The Bible says, 'take heed lest you fall.' (Field Notes 3/23/03)

Ray had four months remaining before he would be re-released, and while he was optimistic and said that God would help him rebuild his marriage, when I asked him if he was ready to stand now, he said very simply, “No.”

Ray knew he was not ready to go back out into the world, where his substance abuse issues among other things are likely to vanquish his faith. His chances of re-offending are really rather good. So what reason would there be to persist in attending religious services? And if he is going to re-offend, and the chaplain and his fellow inmates can predict that, having seen the pattern before, why should they bother to support him now? Perhaps part of it is the belief that the little spark might be just enough to provide some salvation, even if an inmate’s behavior is, for the time being, contradictory.

Warden Burl Cain of Angola Prison is practically famous among Christian inmates. There are articles about him in Christian inmate newspapers and he’s generally heralded as a warden who promotes Christian programs in his prisons, himself an avid Baptist. He’s featured in a book that received the New York Times Book Award, God of the Rodeo, where he responds to a question about inmates who attend religious services just to impress him: “But at least they’re going. At least they’re pretending. At least they’re acting like God-fearing people. And doing all that acting, they might change from the outside in” (Bergner 1998:57).
Imam Mahmoud told me that there is a prayer in Islam, “Oh, Allah, take me away from anything that takes me away from you, and Oh Allah, help my imitations to be real.” That contradictory behavior need not be taken as hard evidence of hopelessness is inherent in both Islam and Christianity, and chaplains, inmates and Warden Burl Cain all seem aware of it. Here Dan Tucker discusses how certain contradictory behaviors were not an indication to him that inmates were insincere.

Homosexuals were getting saved on the mainline and going to the chapel services, coming from the guidance center. They were still maybe active sexually, but it was like you could start to see transitions going on in people’s lives. They really were getting saved, as opposed to going through religious motions. And you could see that the Holy Spirit was having an effect on these guys and they were starting to live a prison version of a holy life. It was really quite something to behold. – Dan Tucker

Like Dan, Marayam Sabree believes that transitions happen sometimes bit by bit, and that that little bit might make a difference.

I have a nephew who practices Islam. He goes inside the institution...He practices when he’s in, but when he’s out he’s not. So that’s a phenomenon that happens, too...Because sometimes they need structure, as they need to be a part of something, and Islam is very strong in the institutions. And so I find that – there was a terminology called the “Jailhouse Muslim,” because they’re only Muslims while they’re in the jail or in prison, then when they go out they slowly go back to their old habits of what they do. This is not everyone. You know, if you’re weak in faith in there, you’re weak in faith out here...But you can’t – in Islam it’s no compulsion in religion. You can’t make anybody practice or do the way you want them to do. It’s either in them or not. And even if they have a little bit in them, and something has happened, and it might be that little bit is enough to save them. To bring them back over. – Maryam Sabree

The struggles begin in the prison setting itself, where race-solidarity and frequent violent confrontations challenged Christian men to maintain their faith on the yard,
and where staff and administrative intolerance presented obstacles to practicing Islam. But, in the end, according to chaplains and prisoners alike, it is actually easier to maintain the faith locked up than it is “on the outs.” About 40% of the sample “backslid” from the time that they were first “saved” or took their shahadah, back into a life of drug-use and criminal offending. This was equally true among Christians and Muslims. Most who did backslide speak now with resolve and perspective on past frailty, and claim to have turned a corner on their spiritual and personal path. And even since turning that corner, each and every one of former prisoners that was interviewed described their most recent re-entry as an ordeal.

What these stories should make clear is the complex nature of faith commitment, especially in the context of a criminal offender’s life. Tables 7 and 8 demonstrate that more graphically, showing the progression of the former inmates who participated in the study, from lives of crime (represented in tan)\(^*\), to times of incarceration (represented in blue), to lives devoted to their faith and free of criminal offense (represented in light green). In Table 7, it is apparent that the moment of commitment to the faith (represented with a vertical crimped line) created a lasting effect.

\(^*\) The tan periods for many of these participants include some short prison and jail sentences, too brief to be represented in these tables.
Table 7 Incarceration and Spiritual Progression

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<th>Name</th>
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<td>Shane Johnston</td>
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<td>Rachid Abdullah</td>
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<td>Ja’far Saadiq</td>
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<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jose Arboles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(participant had no criminal record prior to what he claims is a false charge)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>85</td>
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<td>David Ringer</td>
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<td>92</td>
<td>94</td>
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<td>Sandra Pacheco</td>
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<td>Jeffrey Curtis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meredith Buchanan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nick McDonnell</td>
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<td>Bill Roberts</td>
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<td>Jerome Ingles</td>
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<td>Khadijah Perkins</td>
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In Table 8, however, we see the progression of the participants for whom commitment to faith was not a one-time experience. The “backsliding” here is evident as these former inmates’ journeys from incarceration, as often as not, resulted in another period of criminal lifestyle.

Table 8: Incarceration, Spiritual Progression and Backsliding

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>1970s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali Hassan</td>
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<td>Dan Tucker</td>
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<td>Jameelah Haddad</td>
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<td>Abdul Haddad</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fernando Vega</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tommy Iglesias</td>
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Rational choice theory allows us to cut through the apparent "insincere" motives of religious involvement to a less-judgmental and more insightful understanding of the phenomenon. If we understand, as rational choice theory directs us to, that all religious behavior is motivated, at least in part, by how the individual adherent perceives he or she will benefit from participation, then we can begin to see even purely instrumental attendance at religious services as earnest. The church attendee who goes every Sunday because his status is somehow elevated there is not much different from the attendee who goes there for the promised reward to ultimate elevation.

That's the first reason it is inappropriate to use Dammer's terms sincere and insincere as applied to religion and prisoners. A second is that it might be impossible to assess a person's sincerity, and it is certainly arrogant to try. William James writes, "The roots of a man's virtue are inaccessible to us. No appearances whatever are infallible proofs of grace. Our practice is the only sure evidence, even to ourselves, that we are genuinely Christian" (James 1982:20).

As outsiders, there is little we can know inside the hearts and minds of the people we study. The matter is further complicated by the inescapable contradictions that exist inside every human consciousness. Namely, very seldom does any of us carry out our expressed intentions exactly as we say or believe we will. In fact, our actions are quite often at odds with our intentions. Whether we characterize these contradictions
in action as disappointments or simply as a changes of heart depends on our own values and how attached we were to the projected or planned route. More to the topic at hand, the faithful doubt their faith, and doubters have moments of belief. To stand outside of the individual’s consciousness and judge a contradictory action as a clear indicator of insincerity disregards the complexity of spiritual devotion, indeed of any kind of devotion or feeling. The same is true with sincerity. But since the question of whether a criminal offender has actually found spiritual redemption is loaded with moral weight, assessing sincerity seems like an important dimension of this sort of inquiry. But sincerity simply cannot be assessed. As sociologists, the best we can do is to observe behavior and assess it within the context of what we know. What we know includes 1) most people believe in God and turn to spiritual answers when life’s circumstances present insurmountable questions; 2) most faithful doubt or backslide at some point; 3) being misguided can result in being misguiding with no explicit desire to deceive involved. Ergo, we can at least conclude that the pursuit of distinguishing the sincere from the insincere in a study like this would be at best a fruitless expenditure of energy, at worst an arrogant and inappropriate judgment.

James uses an excerpt from Saint Augustine’s own conversion narrative to illustrate the “divided self,” which is easily applied to the “false starts” observed in this study.

The new will which I began to have was not yet strong enough to overcome that other will, strengthened by long indulgence. So these two wills, one old, one new, one carnal, the other spiritual, contended with each other and disturbed my soul. I understood by my own experience what I had read ‘flesh lusteth against spirit and spirit against flesh.’ It was myself indeed in both the wills, yet more myself in that which I approved in myself than in that which I disapproved in myself. Yet it was through myself that habit had attained so fierce a mastery over me, because I had willingly come whither I willed not. Still bound to earth, I
refused, O God, to fight on thy side, as much afraid to be freed from all bonds, as I ought to have feared being trammeled by them. Thus the thoughts by which I meditated upon thee were like the efforts of one who would awake, but being overpowered with sleepiness is soon asleep again. (James 1982:172)

Saint Augustine is sort of an icon in Christian folklore for someone who loses his way and is redeemed. Augustine’s 4th Century testimony echoes in the testimony of Jameelah Haddad, Dan Tucker, Ali Hasan, Tommy Iglesias and the others who have struggled to “awake” from a persistent sleep. To slip back into sleep, however, is also a common experience, one that James recognizes here in seeming anticipation of Dammer’s characterization of the insincerely religious and of Salzman’s “pseudo-solution.”

Some of you, I feel sure, knowing that numerous backslidings and relapses take place, make of these their apperceiving mass for interpreting the whole subject, and dismiss it with a pitying smile at so much ‘hysterics.’ Psychologically, as well as religiously, however, this is shallow. It misses the point of serious interest, which is not so much the duration as the nature and quality of these shiftings of character to higher levels. Men lapse from every level – we need no statistics to tell us that...[The conversion experience] should for even a short time show a human being what the high-water mark of his spiritual capacity is, this is what constitutes its importance – an importance which backsliding cannot diminish, although persistence might increase it. (James 1982:257)

In the current analysis, the “point of serious interest” coincides with James’s: to observe human beings encountering their spiritual capacity. We must not dismiss the backsliding, for it represents a discrepancy between the idealized and actual role of religion in prison. Social scientists, religious advocates and policy makers, both historically and currently, have overestimated the importance of religion in prison. They also have underestimated its impact on inmates precisely because of the phenomenon of shiftings and lapses, which James reminds us are predictable. But the
dismissive term “jailhouse religion” is still common and the label of “phony” is still applied, although differently between Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, to dichotomize a sample of apparently religious prisoners into two categories, be those categories “sincere and insincere,” “adjusted and maladjusted,” or “recidivists and non-recidivists,” creates too simple a model for meaningful analysis. As these participants have shown us, a prisoner or parolee who looks to be “insincere” because of prison infraction or a parole violation, may just be somewhere early in his or her path, and considering him or her five or ten years down the line, it might be clear that sincerity of devotion was never the problem.
Chapter VII: Lessons and Assumptions

I was in prison for armed robbery, not for singing too loud in church. I was a wasted life. Nobody should feel sorry for me. But once a person is there, he’s going to get out again. And we need to make sure of what’s going on in there – he’s going to get out again. Society is too blind to realize that you’re not really being protected by the prison system. The Christian, or the man who gets some faith, he’s got some tough decisions to make. I’m not easy on convicts. And I don’t hold out much hope for people who want to become Christians once they’re out. Being poor, depressed, it’s hard. – Jerome Ingles

The current wisdom is that 93% of current prisoners in the US will at some point be released. That’s 600,000 a year, 1,600 each day (Petersilia 2003). With that in mind, perhaps we should pay closer attention to what happens for them when they are in prison and when they attempt to come out, “poor and depressed.” There are some studies about the value of rehabilitative supports, and of their unfortunate scarcity (Maruna 2001; Petersilia 2003). But at this point, the only information we have about religious programs and recidivism are the spotty numbers offered by earlier examinations, a dearth that prompts Stark and Bainbridge to write, “Perhaps the most neglected of all topics in the general area [of religion, deviance and social control] involves reform – and especially efforts to prevent those in jails and prisons from committing new crimes upon their release” (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:184).

In this chapter we begin remedy that neglect. This is important because most prisoners will return to society, those who find religion, and those who do not. This is important because our society’s reliance on prisons is increasing, even as there is little evidence that they are effective in correcting criminals, a paradox which provokes the question, what really is the function of the prison? And it is important
because there seems to be an almost unconscious belief that criminals can and will change from the inside out, among religious leaders, among reformed criminals, and implicitly within the structure of the criminal justice system. In this chapter, we will look at participant statements about changing from the inside out, and about the external challenges to the change, leading us to the conclusion that people may indeed change from the inside out, but that the change is not likely to be enough to maintain a life free of crime and incarceration. Finally, this chapter reflects upon the lessons of the study, some of which are more practical than others.

**Inside-Out?**

Warehousing criminals won’t ‘fix them any more than storing your broken TV in the garage will make it work again. They need to change from the inside out. (www.pastorstoprisoners.org)

Society has to respond to crime. According to Durkheim, crime offends the *conscience collective* and requires a punitive response. The primary function of punishing an offender, then, according to Durkheim, is to provide that response.

> [Punishment] does not serve, or serves only very incidentally, to correct the guilty person or to scare off any possible imitators. From this dual viewpoint its effectiveness may rightly be questioned; in any case it is mediocre. Its real function is to maintain inviolate the cohesion of society by sustaining the common consciousness in all its vigour. If that consciousness were thwarted so categorically, it would necessarily lose some of its power, were an emotional reaction from the community not forthcoming to make good on that loss. Thus there would result a relaxation in the bonds of social solidarity. The consciousness must therefore be conspicuously reinforced the moment it meets with opposition. The sole means of doing so is to give voice to the unanimous aversion that the crime continues to evoke, and this by an official act, which can only mean suffering inflicted upon the wrongdoer. (Durkheim 1984:62-63)

While it seems unlikely that the aversion to what is currently defined as criminal is, as Durkheim suggests, “unanimous,” there is something that resonates in the general
sentiment expressed here. Despite ample evidence that the correctional system “does not serve,” or at least does a very “mediocre” job at deterrence, either specific or general, criminal sanctions became more and more punitive during the latter part of the 20th Century (Currie 1998). In truth, despite the term “corrections,” in the current era the criminal justice system is far more oriented toward punishment than toward correction (Garland 1990, Parenti 1999). That incarceration fails to eliminate crime does not diminished its use, implying that perhaps its true purpose is, as Durkheim says, more about “making good” to the collective consciousness than about fixing crime or the criminal.

If we accept this, then we must come to terms with the matters of “correcting the guilty person” and discouraging “possible imitators,” since the punishment addresses these inadequately. Knowing what we do about the variables associated with criminal offense, namely economic hardship, family violence and neglect, illiteracy, unemployment and underemployment, and the like, we would expect that a rise in crime rates would prompt increased attention to family services, public education, adult training and other services that alleviate the pressures associated with criminal offending. But a rise in crime rates typically results in increased spending on the correctional system, and not in these other areas (Shelden 2004).

In other words, we as a society rely to an extreme degree on the incarceration of offenders to resolve the problem of crime. We call the system of incarceration “corrections” to reflect the rehabilitative ideal, something firmly rooted in our
original prison model. Since the 18th Century we have been imprisoning offenders who were, at least originally, supposed to be redeemed through isolation and spiritual learning, then released, improved. If you frame religious enrichment as the solution to crime, you assume that moral failing is the most relevant cause of criminal offending. So, logic concludes, our prison system was built around correcting the individual who has failed morally.

As sensibilities changed and public institutions became more secular, the overtly religious aspect fell back. Now both religion and secular rehabilitative efforts have dwindled to a negligible level (Rothman 1990, Garland 1990), but we continue to use the model that they justified. And we use it ardently. If we consider the amount of money a society spends on something as an indication of its worth to that society, prisons are a very valuable program – in the year 2000 alone, $34.1 billion tax dollars went toward prisons (Shelden 2005). We do have public schools, youth programs, diversion programs, parenting classes, foster care, things designed to intercept the remote causes of crime – but we put relatively little money into those, and we appear to be increasing national tax outlay for prisons at the expense of other programs such as education (Sullivan 2002). Rather, when a crime is committed we, at great expense, incarcerate. It is as though we are confident that incarcerating prisoners will have a positive effect, all by itself, and that prison is a place of transformation. It is as though we have never examined the assumption that prison will act upon the soul of the prisoner and by the time she is released will have done its job to make her a
moral, upstanding, law-abiding citizen. It is as though we believe moral failure to be the sole cause of criminal behavior.

If it were true that moral failure were the sole cause of criminal behavior, then a new moral resolve, informed by faith and adopted in prison, should be enough to place a criminal offender firmly on a crime-free path. She could simply change her mind, and change her life, from the inside out. But even the participants in this study acknowledge that this is not true. We learned earlier that many found their moral resolve and then lost it again, several times. This is consistent with what Shadd Maruna points out, that crime desistance is a maintained process, requiring continual work external encouragement (Maruna 2001).

As the data below show, moral resolve did not act alone in these lives to put them on that crime-free path. Material and program support from their church groups was also extremely instrumental. In other words, for most prisoners, changing from the inside out won't make any lasting difference as long as they have to return to the hostile environments from which they came. The analogy offered by Pastors to Prisoners, a website dedicated to Christian prison ministry, likens prisoners to broken televisions that will not be fixed if they are simply warehoused. These pastors believe that fixing criminals involves spiritual enrichment, so that they may change from the inside out. But, taking the analogy one step further, if that television broke from being left out in the rain, fixing it in the garage then putting it back into the rain is not likely to keep it working.
In this section, we will hear from participants who did experience a moral transformation, and from those religious workers who escorted them on their spiritual path. While believing wholeheartedly in the human capacity to change from the inside out, both groups of people unequivocally support the contention that the returning felon faces a panoply of difficult obstacles that moral transformation alone simply does not surmount.

_**Stressing Hard**_

Getting out of prison is at once a relief and a trauma. Involvement in a spiritual community can mitigate the pains of re-entry, but it does not eliminate them entirely. Anger and anxiety top the list of what felons returning from prison have to deal with.

Shane Johnston talks about what he was feeling when he first got out.

> If you ever want to gamble on a sure thing, here's what you gamble on: every human being that gets out of a penal system is angry. Every single one. The degree differs, but they are angry...I was angry...I didn’t know I was angry. I had a relationship with Jesus, I had peace. But when I got out, all of a sudden the bars were gone. I didn’t have to bury my face in a pillow and scream to get rid of the tension that I was feeling on the inside. I could yell at you. What were you going to do? Lock me up? Put me in the hole? Call the guards? You weren’t going to do nothing. I didn’t realize it, until I put a hole in the wall and my wife told me I needed counseling. – Shane Johnston

When Bill Roberts came back, he felt ill-equipped to deal with life. He was “stressing hard,” and could easily have gone back to what he knew – methamphetamine.

Economic footing is significant – get them a job, get them a bed. But spiritual footing is just as significant. Otherwise, they’re going back...I mean I could have gone...and jumped right off into the same thing [that I used to do] if I wanted to, and the transition wouldn’t have been that terrible. But the bottom line was I had
to relearn about everybody. I could handle anyone in prison because that’s where I got sane, if you will. But I’m not prepared for you or a boss or kids or youth or that sort of thing. Because that environment hadn’t come to me yet. So I was terribly distracted, trying to deal with people...So that nose-dived my time with God and prayer and in studying the Word...But I never stopped going to church. I needed it because I was stressing hard. I wasn’t prepared for what the world – I wasn’t prepared for all this...[So I started] saving my time so that I could pray. Saving my time so that I could study [the Word], so that I kept getting closer to God. But we’ll never get all the way there until we meet Him. So it’s always a journey; it’s always learning. And if you stop that then you risk straying. It’s like being on a river, I guess. If you stop paddling, you’re going to get taken downstream end up places you don’t probably want to go...It’s really easy to go back to what you know. – Bill Roberts

Tommy Iglesias is an example of someone who was taken downstream, back to what he knew. As discussed in the last chapter, and similar to what Bill says above, a prisoner develops the skills and resolve to stay true to his faith inside, but he sometimes cannot overcome the temptations that accompany returning to the very life, city, community and friends that surrounded him during his downfall.

In prison I was validated after a while because of being sincere and walking with Christ. I walked with Christ for 3 years and 7 months, but when I came out, same results...I came out and it was the same old thing. People getting high, people in the neighborhood with the drugs and the scene. And I was worn down; I was worn down. Because I didn’t have the support and I didn’t know how to go out and ask. That’s one thing, I’ve never been a person to go out and ask for help...All I knew was going back to the same things that wore me down, you know? In prison I was able to isolate myself and spend a lot of time with the Lord. I was locked up in a single cell so I had a lot of time to study, to dissect the Word. I had a lot of time for prayer for a relationship with God. – Tommy Iglesias

The anxiety of going back to the town or city where the crime took place is exacerbated by now feeling like a misfit. Nick McDonnell articulates these feelings here as he describes how it felt to come “home.”

I was released originally, as most guys are, to the community that I had caused harm. And, while going to prison is the greatest shell-shock that I’ve ever
experienced, when one is released, there is no question about the certain fear and 
trepidation that one feels. I had more advantage than anybody I know by virtue of 
the fact that I had developed the support network while I was in there...I had a 
whole community of people that were there for me, celebrating my return. Now, 
having said that, I was immediately isolated because I went back to the county 
[where I had committed my crimes], a county far away from here, here where I 
developed this [faith] community...The friends that I had didn’t run to be by me. 
They, I don’t think they knew what to do with me, quite frankly. I was fearful 
that — you know you worry about everything. For one thing I had been observed 
24/7 for the last seven years of my life. So you have that impression when you’re 
outside. To go to a department store or a mall or something is a big ordeal. It’s a 
big ordeal. I had a couple of friends that I thought were loyal to my cause. One 
guy took me out to lunch and then I called a few times and he stopped returning 
my calls and I wasn’t going to keep calling him. So I felt a lot of loneliness and a 
lot of isolation and fear. And it turned out, because I had this distant community 
of faith, and I was trying to arrange my continued parole out — and ultimately I 
was able to do that, I was able to transfer my parole — I could talk to somebody on 
the phone and that was a big deal. I had somebody to reach out to — most guys 
don’t have that. You know, you don’t fit. When you get out of prison, if you 
spent any time, you aren’t going to fit into this world right away. I was painfully 
aware of that. But because I had support and love, I was able to say focused and 
take in the sweetness of what was around me.

In my case it made [coming out of prison] much easier, because I had a faith 
community that was longing to greet me. I heard an analogy once that I’d love to 
share...In Nigeria they have this wonderful tradition where if someone came 
home from prison after five, ten, fifteen years — whatever it was — the community 
greet him with a big brass band in celebration. That’s exactly, in my view, what 
prisoners need and deserve. It’s rough. It’s rough to get through that. What 
we’re greeted by is shame and fear. Keep it quiet, keep it low-key. If you don’t 
have to answer the question of the felony on the first job deal. Short of 
individuals who take it upon themselves to find out what you’re about and give 
you some kind of hope for reentry, you’re very isolated and you’re kind of 
fending for yourself. You don’t fit. Guys end up re-offending and going back to 
this dysfunctional community, but at least it’s somewhere they know they can fit. 
So, short of a big brass band, I came home to a loving community of support. — 
Nick McDonnell

Being involved in a faith community mitigated the pains of re-entry for Nick and 
gave him something that “most guys don’t have” when they return from prison, love 
and support. In her recent book When Prisoners Come Home Joan Petersilia doesn’t
explicitly propose that a brass band meet the parolee, but she does emphasize the importance of a supportive community.

If prison is judged necessary, then maximum effort should be made to encourage ties with the family and community throughout the prisoner’s stay, and prerelease programs should focus on actively connecting the prisoner to the host community (e.g., work release, study release, and so on). Every known study that has been able to directly examine the relationship between a prisoner’s legitimate community ties and recidivism has found that feelings of being welcome at home and the strength of interpersonal ties outside prison help predict postprison adjustment. (Petersilia 2003:245-246, emphasis original)

Inmates leave prison in California with $200 “gate money” and little else. The ex-felons in this study appreciate the meaning of having a faith community there to greet them upon release. Ja’far Saadiq felt embraced by his faith community and valued just having someone to pick him up when he got out.

[Being involved in the Muslim community made coming out] much easier. I came out to a community that embraced me, assisted me. I had a big interview at the urban league for a position as a counselor. A sister bought me a suit, taught me how to tie a tie. Yeah, I got a lot of support from the community. I got a lot of support from the chaplain. A Muslim chaplain picked me up when I was released. And a lot of brothers and sisters came forward. They helped me with employment and with coming back into society. Because of that I didn’t feel like an outsider at all. You know, there was no stigma, even though I had been in prison. – Ja’far Saadiq

Jeffrey Curtis also had someone to pick him up, and compares his experience with the majority of prisoners, who are not so lucky.

See my pastor really loved me…and some months before I got ready to come home he started calling, calling every church in San Francisco until he found a church family knowing everything about me, full disclosure, they agreed to walk with me and help me…I got on that bus that day [to go home from prison] with 8 or 9 other men who had not given their lives to the Lord, who had not studied, who had not really submitted to God’s authority…As I got off the bus I looked over to the left and…I had a whole new family to come home to. My pastor was standing there crying…they just run up to me and wrapping their arms around me…as I looked over to the right I saw the others walking off into the night, one
of them without even a coat. Nobody there. Every one of them, if you will, good men, really wanted to change. Wanted a break. All they were going to do was walk off into the night, and to my knowledge, every one of them is back in prison.
– Jeffrey Curtis

Having a new community helped to allay Shane Johnston’s fears that he would, as Bill Roberts puts it, “stop paddling.”

My greatest fear was that I was going back to prison. So I made a deeper commitment to Jesus...I had done so many crazy things; I knew that if I didn’t put myself in the right environment, I was in trouble...I didn’t want to be around any crazy people...I led a very rigid life at that time. Very rigid. So my commitment deepened. But also got more realistic.

[Being a Christian] made it easier because I made new friends. And the friends that I made, for one thing, they had jobs. And they wanted to encourage me. They wanted to help us; they wanted to help me once they saw that I was genuine.
– Shane Johnston

Like Shane, Sandra Pacheco felt it wise to make new friends, in her faith community, to avoid falling back into old patterns.

I have not seen any of my “old friends” since I got clean [gestures quote marks]. They would have given me dope. I wanted to be closer to my family... [When I got out] all my new associations were Christian and in recovery – Sandra Pacheco

Khadijah also relied heavily on her new faith community upon release from a 19-year sentence.

I think it has made [coming back out] easier, the Muslim community, the women really embraced me and helped me, took me shopping, just were there for me. I could call several of the Muslim sisters anytime...Being a Muslim helped me make the decision to move to the Bay Area...I wanted to be around other Muslims that I knew and felt a kinship with throughout the years. – Khadijah

For David Ringer the Catholic Church offered something against the negative psychological effects of prison.

[Being released from prison] was a real difficult transition. I felt unworthy. After you’ve been beaten down for a couple of years, you tend to feel like you’re no
good... I don’t believe I would have been successful going back into society and building a life without the church. –David Ringer

The support, love, and new friends that come with spiritual involvement give returning prisoners something to hang on to. But the benefit of a spiritual community is not limited to the stability and love it provides.

Practical Realities

Many ex-felons feel that the system all but dooms them to re-offend. As Nick McDonnell mentions above, returning to the county where they committed their offense makes things difficult. Old associates, a stubborn reputation and shame await them in their hometowns.

I changed my environment. You have to. The reason so many guys go back is that they can’t change their environment. The actual parole system is set up for failures. You get paroled, you have to go back to the same community that you failed in...A lot of guys when they go to prison they get married, some of them get involved in different groups, and the group says, hey come over here and we can help you, but the parole system won’t allow it to happen. You could possibly go back to your community and do well for a while and then transfer, but hey, most guys can’t do that. – Shane Johnston

David Ringer and Jeffrey Curtis share Shane’s impression that the parole system sets felons up for failure.

You can’t ever really put it all behind you...the criminal justice system is programming for failure. –David Ringer

The entire thing is built on failure. The justice system, the criminal system, the prison system, all of it is built on failure. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to blame society for our decisions...I put myself in prison. Every man in there, we put ourselves in prison. It’s not society, it’s not even our abusive daddies...But the simple fact is the entire system is built, designed on the basis of failure. In other words, if we fail, the system has succeeded. If we fail, then they catch us, they get the bad guys back in the prison, the system succeeded. – Jeffrey Curtis
Joan Petersilia points out that there is little reason to expect re-entering felons not to re-offend.

It is not surprising that most inmates who leave prison become reinvolved in crime. After all, they had serious needs prior to imprisonment; most of them went untreated in prison; and now they face a staggering number of personal and financial problems at release. (Petersilia 2003:139)

Among those personal and financial problems is a hostile job market. Employment is usually a condition of parole, and it is crucial to the future success of returning parolees (Lipsey 1995; Uggen 2000; Bushway and Reuter 2002). Mark Lipsey found employment to be the most relevant variable associated with avoiding reoffending in his meta-analysis of nearly 400 studies from 1950 to 1990 (Lipsey 1995).

However, as Holzer’s research shows, employers are unwilling to hire ex-offenders (Holzer 1996; Holzer, Raphael et al. 2002). Holzer and his colleagues also found that more employers check criminal backgrounds now than did ten years ago (Holzer, Raphael et al. 2002).

Fear of being asked about one’s felony record prompted some of the returning felons to take menial jobs at first. With little power in the job market, they relied heavily on their faith to bolster their belief that they would succeed. Jose Arboles had difficulty getting a job once he was carrying the label convict.

It was a rough road to get turned down time after time, job after job because of my record. And I flipped pizzas, and I did menial jobs because that’s all that they would give me. But that didn’t stop me from going forward. That didn’t stop me from going to college. That didn’t stop me from pursuing my education. That didn’t stop me from expanding my spiritual life. That didn’t stop me from doing what I said I was going to do. I didn’t know what it was. I didn’t know what my journey was. I just knew that I need to keep a progressive momentum going...I
could truly believe that through my good works – I could see the rewards. I could see constantly how God was putting things before me, and then I would see a year later. “Ah hah! Now I see why I had to go through this because look where it put me.” And it was always through that trust. My trust and my faith with my relationship with my God, that I can continue to move forward, because He continued to show me. And He could be a Her, it’s just a spirit – it’s just a word that we use. – Jose Arboles

Sandra Pacheco was afraid to disclose her record, and credits God for the job her aunt eventually helped her get.

First job I got after, I cleaned a catering truck for a guy that was in recovery. My second job in recovery was through my aunt, spinning blood at dialysis clinic. This is God again. I was in [my recovery program] and I was worried about getting a job. I was being honest now, and I knew they were going to ask me about my record on the application or in the interview. I told [the director of the program] I was having a hard time, she said leave it blank –if I didn’t put anything, I didn’t lie. So I went to apply for the job and my hands were sweating. But [the woman who was hiring] never handed me an application. Later, we became close enough and I asked my boss if my aunt had told her about my record. She said it didn’t matter. “I already knew I needed you, I knew you would be reliable because your aunt”... I still work there. I work a dialysis job 3 days a week 12 hours a day. I’m here [at the recovery center] the other three days a week [unpaid]. – Sandra Pacheco

Nick McDonnell is the only participant who had a college degree before he was incarcerated. He took a temporary job that did not match his qualifications, but, like Sandra, eventually found long-term employment.

I was totally depending on God here, and I got this job on the docks, as a carpenter’s helper. That job goes its course. Now I’ve met my future wife, I’ve developed more confidence and I’m working on the whole adjustment. The hesitation to apply for a job has everything to do with the question about felony. I assumed that a job that wouldn’t ask me [about my felony record] didn’t exist. The application for [a state agency] asks about felony, but it’s preceded by a question instructing not to answer it, unless asked in the examination process. So I left it blank. In the interview, the interviewer asked me why I had a 7-year hole in my work history. I said, “personal reasons” and apparently they didn’t want to ask any further questions because they were afraid of being sued... I checked with my PO and with my lawyer, and they said it was OK to have done it that way and I got hired. – Nick McDonnell
According to a 2001 study, Nick and Sandra were shrewd not to volunteer their criminal records. Ex-convicts who admit to their record are more likely to be passed over than equally qualified ex-convicts who simply refuse to answer the question (Western, Kling et al. 2001). Jose, Nick and Sandra were all depending on God to help them in their job search, but all three also had other, earth-bound resources. Sandra had avoided her family during her years of addiction, so as not to alienate them or even victimize them. So when she returned from prison, she had positive family relationships she could rely on. Jose also had remained close with his family through his incarceration and had never really been involved in a habitual criminal lifestyle. Nick had a college degree and a reasonable resume from his prior life, and while the felony could easily have prevented him from ever having another good job, he was not as disadvantaged as many returning felons.

But for a lot of the ex-felons, the only resources they could rely on were from their new faith community. Earlier, Ja'far Saadiq talked about getting a job interview and a suit because of the Muslim community that embraced him when he got out. Ali Hasan enjoyed similar support.

My contacts in terms of employment were through the Muslims. They were responsible when I came home for housing, employment, education. They knew that there was a certification program there for drug rehabilitation employment. They got me several jobs. Most of these Muslims were managers and directors, and they had contacts so I was able to do that and provide for my family and go to school. And the agencies that they worked for were supportive. – Ali Hasan

Father Flannigan sees his role with returning felons in practical terms as much as spiritual.
Jobs are tough enough out there to get even if you are qualified and have no record...I would try to hook them up as best I could with a job. [But not necessarily with a church]. I’m more concerned with getting a guy some rent money and that he can buy some clothes. Let the church come next. – Father Flannigan

Getting a job is certainly one of the most daunting tasks for the re-entering prisoner, and having a supportive community to help provide introductions and recommendations is a big help. But employment assistance is not the only thing that religious communities do for the convicts in their flock. According to participants, being paroled to the place where they committed their crimes meant facing stigma and temptation that they were not sure they could equal. To have one’s parole transferred can ameliorate a parolee’s chances of successful reintegration, but dealing with the parole authority all by oneself often yields nothing. Church leaders can actively advocate for a parole transfer, and often do. Again, Father Flannigan appreciates the value of helping returning felons with more than just their spiritual growth.

I helped a guy that has done 55 of his 70 years [behind bars] to transfer his parole from San Francisco. He was living at a half-way house at the corner of Gough and Mission, and he had a relative in the East Bay and I worked with the parole agent to get him out of San Francisco. You know, he was five, six blocks away from all the fellas. He knew half the guys down there and that’s a temptation, you know, you got to stay away from all that stuff. Course, I think you reach a certain age. This guy took much longer than anybody else cause he’s now 70. He’s living in a home in Florida. – Father Flannigan

Jerome Ingles was also granted a parole transfer, at the behest of leaders in his faith community, as were Nick McDonnell and Shane Johnston. Below, Jerome describes how the prison chaplain connected him to a rural faith-based halfway house, the leaders of which, in turn, requested that his parole be transferred.
[The prison chaplain] let [this Christian couple] know that I didn’t have anyplace to go. I would have gone into a homeless shelter when I got out of prison. They tried to get me into a place. And a week before I got out I found out that I had been accepted into this [Christian ranch] program...But I was being paroled to a different county...so, at the request of the guy who ran the ranch, the parole department transferred my parole. – Jerome Ingles

Some of the participants, like Jerome Ingles and Sandra Pacheco were able to go to faith-based reentry centers, but the scarcity of halfway houses in general puts many parolees at risk for homelessness (Petersilia 2003). Without the ranch option arranged by the Christian friends he was making, Jerome would have been homeless, as Meredith Buchanan would have been. They are not alone – Petersilia reports that according to California Department of Corrections half of the parolees living in large urban areas like San Francisco and Los Angeles are homeless (Petersilia 2003:122). This has both to do with the difficulty parolees have in finding employment and with a startling shortage of transitional assistance.

Halfway houses, which were fairly widespread in the 1970s, have declined in popularity. The American Correctional Association (2000) reports that just 55 halfway houses were being operated by 10 state agencies in 1999. There were fewer than 20,000 inmates served in halfway houses during that year (.04 percent of all inmates released that year). (Petersilia 2003)(99)

For a few of our ex-felons, their faith communities were able to provide for a place to stay during their transition, but for many, as we will see below, even faith-based services fall short. The Protestant chapel at CVP has a post-release program that specifically aims to provide housing for inmates who participate in religious programs in prison. The inmates who coordinate the program explained how it works in this excerpt from my field notes:
Gustavo began by describing Prison Aftercare Placement Assistance Program (PAPA). Gustavo was the chaplain’s clerk. He was a Latino man serving a 29-year sentence. He had committed his life to Christ in the first year he served of the long sentence. The PAPA program has been going for 10 years. It was established by this chaplain. It’s a program that places parolees in residential aftercare facilities that the chaplain has pre-selected. In order to qualify for the residential benefits, an inmate must complete 200 credit hours (of Christian education; points obtained through participation in FREE, ABA, PRPP or RICH). The program “encourages responsibility – shows them that you don’t just have things given to you, you need to work toward it.” There are 5 plans (A-F), Plan A being the most comprehensive, with arrangements coordinated for an aftercare facility. Most inmates go with Plan D, which only requires 10 hours of Christian education and provides the parolee with 1) a letter that says he attended chapel, 2) a model tracer letter requesting information and assistance, and a standard resource list for the area into which the man is being paroled. Organizing this program has involved challenges such as locating and qualifying the service organizations on the outside. The chaplain generally does all of this himself. He writes letters to churches and asks them what kinds of services they have. Then he has to either visit the facilities or send someone (a volunteer) to visit them to make sure they qualify. When I asked them for numbers of inmates served, they told me that they had served about 50 guys in the last year, and that overall they have served over 200 inmates paroling. Only about 4 or 5 have been able to qualify for Plan A. – Field Notes 3/23/03

For those five inmates in ten years, the chapel program may have made a substantial difference, ensuring that they had a place to live upon release. For the rest, the chances of coming out homeless put them at grave risk for both offending and victimization. Meredith Buchanan was homeless when she was released from prison the first time, before she found her faith path, and went to a secular halfway house after her last release from prison.

When I was released from prison I went back to doing exactly what I was always doing. Because I came out homeless, I still didn’t know where my children were, where my husband was. I didn’t have any availability for my medication or any of the things I was doing inside to stay sane. So I didn’t report, you know, started using again... [Then] I went to federal prison in 1993, and I came out in August of 1995, and haven’t gone back or been arrested... I was given 30 months, and my crime was bank robbery. I think I spent 25 months or something. I was also released to a halfway house, but I was finished serving time. I was on federal probation. I came out and did something very different, because of my spiritual
involvement while I was incarcerated, and also completing a drug program. And attending a Kairos Inside prison retreats for Christians. A lot of different things came to play, and I chose to relocate. – Meredith Buchanan

Later in her story Meredith tells us that she was forced to leave that halfway house after only two months because they needed the bed for someone who was in greater need. They gave her no notice, and that night she was homeless again until she found a room to rent. Her involvement in Kairos Outside could not prevent her from having to sleep on the street where she “walked around the tenderloin and saw people shooting up and prostituting. And I thought ‘that’s what my life was like.’ I went down to the financial district and laid down on a bench and a homeless guy pointed a knife to me.” She is quite sure that her spiritual awakening helped her get through that, but she clearly had to withstand a terrible risk because there were not a lot of resources out there to help her, secular or faith-based. Roy McLean says this about the lack of good reentry assistance, even in the church.

Those who stay sober and continue with their faith practice [have a good chance of making it after release]. That is still a small minority of them. Unless they have had a long sentence and spent a lot of time in the chapel, they don’t usually stay out of trouble when they come out. Going in is horrible; coming out is almost as bad. Most of them have alienated their family who used to practice [the faith], and the friends they had before they went in are not the people they want to be associating with when they come out. They come out the door with something less than $200 in their pocket and 48 hours to report to their parole officers, who don’t really help them to find a job. It’s hard for them not to go back. They have an aspiration in their heart to do better, but there’s very little out there for them, even most [Catholic] churches. There’s St. Vincent de Paul and the St. Anthony Foundation that has a two-month farm program in Marin, near Bolinas, followed up by 6 months in San Francisco. But the program can only serve a couple of dozen people at a time (men and women), and there are hundreds of prisoners coming out in the Bay Area all the time. San Francisco has a lot of [secular] programs for inmates transitioning, but they all have waiting lists. And a lot of them will only serve people with an active drug problem. If you’ve been locked up and clean for a few years, your need may not be as immediate as that of someone who is currently using. – Roy McLean
Jeffrey Curtis is acutely aware of the inadequacies in this area, having been a parolee himself, and now in his role as a Non-denominational Christian minister. He feels that the Christian community needs to provide better care for returning felons.

There's no shortage of volunteers going into prison...It's the aftercare where we [Christians] have fallen short so much. – Jeffrey Curtis

The Muslim community also appears to fall short in this area. Maryam Sabree has been volunteering with inmates for years and shares the feedback they have given her about reentry services.

[Male Muslim prisoners would tell us] We needed more support. We need more Muslim male support. They want programs. They want seminars. Their concern that they relate to me, from San Quentin, to Mill Creek, to the various ones, is they want support from the community. They know that there is a recidivism rate amongst people coming out of prison, and back in, back and forth. They themselves they know this. And so they want to be able to have something set up, so once they come out the transition will be better for them so that they don’t have to come [back] in. A lot of inmates know that they were supporting other inmates, especially at San Quentin, with reading. I mean, to hear a 50-year old man to tell how he felt learning to read for the first time was just overwhelming for me...Not reading or lack of education takes them into another direction because they have to find other ways to make their money or do what they have to do, versus if they had a better education they could do better. So they want something in place that assists them when they get ready to come out, and not just once they get out, but pre-release situations. That they could have something available from the Muslim community to be able to come out to, if you’re in there for drugs, they want an Islamic place for a drug treatment program. And they do have one in San Francisco now. – Maryam Sabree

It is Maryam’s impression that Muslim men released from prison feel the absence of good follow-up programs more than the women do. This may be simply because they outnumber the women by probably close to 5:1, or it may reflect, at least in part, what was suggested earlier, that certain of women’s relationships endure incarceration more than men’s do, perhaps giving women more than men a place to turn for support.
upon release. In any event, the Muslim community does have some supportive services in place, as comments from Ja’far Saadiq and Jameelah Perkins revealed above. But they do not meet all the requirements of all the parolees in need. Rachid Abdullah currently tries to provide the services that were lacking when he was released. It is, incidentally, Rachid Abdullah’s program to which Maryam Sabree refers in the passage above.

[When I was released from prison] the masjid didn’t have anything in place. A lot of prominent Muslims have been in prison, but still there’s a stigma that’s attached to you… Even in situations where you’re dealing with people with no more accomplishments that you, as someone with a prison background, they never really get over it… Some years later, at my masjid, I was asked to develop a prison outreach program. The whole reason for the program was to take up the slack that the imams couldn’t take up. We covered prisons all through California, answering questions etc. After about three years, brothers were getting out of prison and not having anything in terms of social programs, not even someone there to broker services. They were so impressed with the prison outreach program, but they would come out and there wasn’t anything for them. A lot of them didn’t have the patience or understanding… going right back because there was nothing there to embrace them. All of my education and skills and experience are rooted in social services – I developed a social services program. We opened the doors in 2000. When people would get out of prison, we would offer wrap-around services, for anybody who needed the services, but for the most part people who felt that conventional services had failed them. – Rachid Abdullah

Faith groups do offer support services for returning inmates. Programs run by the Catholic Church are not limited to Catholic clients and have very little religious content, but they are all over capacity with waiting lists. Prison Fellowship is very proud of their aftercare program for Christians emerging from their in prison programs, although ex-inmates say it falls short of providing the level of care needed to the number of inmates who need it. The same is said of the Muslim community in the Bay Area. This is not to say that no effort is being made by these faith groups,
simply that an individual’s journey from criminal offender to truly reintegrated
citizen is not simple. Though substantially aided by a “conversation with God” on
the yard, during solitary confinement, or at a Kairos retreat, a change of that
magnitude requires a lot of support.

Even the prison chaplains, who are unrelentingly hopeful for the power of spiritual
transformation on an inmate’s life, also realize that poverty and desperation are major
contributors to the building of a criminal offender. Father Flannigan discusses the
causes of street crime below.

I think there’s the proximate cause and then there’s the remote cause [of street
crime]. The proximate cause would be drug addiction. And then the remote
cause would be family disintegration, family upheaval, inability of the kid to do
well in school, or to pick the proper friends in a very negative atmosphere. I
mean look at Oakland. How does a kid make it through Oakland with all the
crime? They have homicides galore. So you got that poverty and all that stuff.
Those are the remote causes. So let’s say you grew up in Oakland and you’re
expected to go to school. You’re expected to go to work. You’re expected to be
a good kid. And you see all these guys driving around; they’ve got a nice car and
they’re making money. And they may, if they’re not using dope, they’re selling
it, and you say, “Jeez, there something to that. They’re getting away with
something. Why shouldn’t I sell a little bit, use a little bit?” And if you become
addicted, you don’t have eight problems, namely familial, work, you just have
one, and that’s getting your next balloon. So I think there’s the immediate cause
and the remote. The immediate I think is pretty much dope. See I don’t think
these guys have the blood of demons running through their veins. I don’t think
anyone is intrinsically bad. – Father Flannigan

Imam Mahmoud also sees the causes of crime as having more to do with poverty than
with simple immorality.

Prisons are a political solution to a social problem. You know, we build prisons
because people think it makes them safer at night to know that all these bad guys
are locked up. But that’s not really why, it doesn’t make you any safer because
we have 33 prisons in California. What is going to change the conditions of this
society is when you change the conditions of what people live in and the
hopelessness that people have to survive in...Hopelessness is really what leads people to prison, lack of opportunity, the feeling that they've been dispossessed and disenfranchised from the society, that's what leads people to prison. – Imam Mahmoud

Reverend Ruskin and Imam Bilal made similar acknowledgements that factors outside the individual’s spirit contribute to criminal behavior. As overwhelming as a prisoner’s religious experience may be, it alone will not give her a place to sleep, a job, or any other respite from the poverty and the feeling that she is “dispossessed and disenfranchised” that helped lead her to crime in the first place. As Roman philosopher Horace wrote in the first century, B.C.,

Poverty urges us to do and suffer anything that we may escape from it, and so leads us away from virtue.

We call it a system of crime control, and we use the term corrections to describe what it does with the criminal offenders. However, a system that does not recognize Horace’s astute observation made over 2000 years ago, or the insights of participants made here on the practical challenges to moral resolve, is bound to be ineffectual at controlling crime, “mediocre” at best, and potentially quite harmful. This criminal justice approach that relies almost exclusively on incarceration is based on the assumption that incarceration will effect a moral transformation that will in turn reverse the criminal tendencies of the offender. This assumption is flawed as applied to our current system, of course, since our prisons offer the inmate almost no rehabilitative services. More to the point, though, if even those who experience the moral transformation view the system as having set them up for failure, and are still
faced with joblessness and homelessness upon release, and still fear that they will reoffend, then the assumption is flawed because crime is about more than morality.

The potential impermanence of moral resolve and its need to be nurtured and supported by forces outside of the individual returning felon’s consciousness are important lessons from this study, ones that are endorsed by other studies of parole success (Maruna 2001; Petersilia 2003; O’Brien 2003). The next section will sum up the other lessons we can draw from participant stories.

**New Knowledge from This Study**

In the following section, we will review the salient lessons that have emerged from this research, and acknowledge that some of what participants have shown us can be applied in secular settings, while others are strictly dependent upon faith. Still trying to answer the question, why this research matters, I feel compelled to articulate in one place some useful, practical, non-religious tools that the participant data has provided. I also feel it is necessary, however, not to boil these people’s stories down to sterile little objects that bear no resemblance to what they themselves understand to be the most important dimensions of their experience. The next two subsections cover each of these tasks separately. First is a list of the lessons learned from this research that can be applied in a secular way, and a discussion of God’s hand in participants’ lives follows.

**Secular Lessons from the Study of Faith**

As discussed above, our research points to the fragility of religious commitment. In the face of challenges, both inside and out of the prison, many offenders who find
religion lose it again, undermining the assumptions with which the original prisons were built, and with which the early research has been burdened. The fluctuating and unsteady nature of faith commitment parallels general patterns of crime desistence, where career criminals may resolve repeatedly that they will change their lives, only to find themselves back in prison contemplating the same questions they had on the previous trip (Maruna 2001).

There are, however, real and substantive changes that do take place for some prisoners in the prison. People who “were stealing from the church” are now committed to helping others to give their own lives purpose, and they themselves certainly attribute their disinterest in crime to their religious transformation.

But looking closely at these data for their general lessons, it becomes evident that some aspects of what participants describe as transformative are not necessarily the exclusive domain of faith. Some chaplains and ex-inmates expressed that it was love, not scripture, in the end that makes the biggest difference, suggesting that there may be room for a secular approach that could be transformative in a similar way. Here are three such statements from a Muslim, a Catholic and a Born-Again Christian.

And as long as you have the ability to not let prison destroy you and make you less than a human being, which is does try to do, if you can keep your humanity intact, and believe with your humanity, and come out of this place, and make a difference in this world, I say, you’ll do more – your life and the statement of your life will do more than any other statement or any other lecture or any other talk, just the fact that you’re out here doing something making a positive contribution. – Imam Mahmoud
Kairos is a program that goes into the prison and talks to the guys about
Christianity. And as I felt all of the time about Kairos, and as I’ve said to the
Kairos guys is the importance and the effectiveness of Kairos is not so much what
they say but who they are. In other words, all these guys that volunteer, and their
wives, that come in are dedicated people. So you might have a Kairos guy giving
a talk on Luke 3:11 or something, some scriptural thing, and maybe saying it
nicely, that’s nice. But the real benefit of Kairos is the guy coming in to give the
talk, spending his weekend with these cons when he could be elsewhere doing
more personal things, going to his cabin in Lake Tahoe – some of these guys are
high rollers in Kairos, and they could be doing that, but they aren’t. And I tell the
Kairos guys that, that I think that that’s the big secret of their success. – Father
Flannigan

You’re going to affect people more by loving them than if you read the whole
Bible to them. – Sandra Pacheco

These are examples of participants who specifically recognize love as even more
salient than religious teaching, but throughout the text we have heard other
participants emphasize the importance of a loving community, or a “moral
community.”

These data support the importance of the moral community in the life of the felon
who finds faith. For example, ex-felons discussed how much harder it was not to fall
off the path once they were released and no longer surrounded by their faith
community who provided, among other things, informal social control. The moral
communities that are formed through faith group participation in prison are often
comprised of much stronger interpersonal bonds than these individuals have
elsewhere in their lives. These bonds give individuals a sense of belonging and a
community that holds them accountable. But this kind of social group does not
strictly have to be formed around faith tenets, and the importance of community on
the changes that our study participants went through may offer a model for secular programming, as well. Namely, programs that create communities of trust, interdependency and mutual accountability may have more success than programs that do not.

Braithwaite’s theory of reintegrative shaming also relies on the research that finds “sanctions imposed by relatives, friends or a personally relevant collectivity” to be more effective against criminal offending than formal punishment (Braithwaite 1989:69). This is a parallel premise to that put forth in the moral communities hypothesis (Stark, Doyle et al. 1980; Welch and Tittle 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1996), which replaced early efforts to measure religious belief against deviance, efforts that did not produce the expected relationship (Hirschi and Stark 1969).

Along with love and moral community, many participants emphasized forgiveness and seeing themselves as forgivable as key to their journey to a crime-free, redeemed life. John Briathwaite’s work also gives us a context for understanding the importance of forgiveness to help decertify the offender as deviant. He writes,

Unfortunately, the way we respond to deviance, particularly crime, in the West, gives free play to degradation ceremonies of both a formal and informal kind to certify deviance, while providing almost no place in the culture for ceremonies to decertify deviance. (Braithwaite 1989:163)

In reintegrative shaming the “repentant role” is a “turning point between shame and reintegration” (Braithwaite 1989:162), a role that, according to our participants, is easily assumed by the prisoner who becomes involved in any of the religious groups.
studied, but that is otherwise not fostered in the American criminal justice system (with the exception of the quasi-religious 12-step programs).

Durkheim writes about the shame that punishment imposes, here discussing what Braithwaite would probably call stigmatizing shaming:

There is above all one form of punishment where this passionate character is more apparent than elsewhere: it is shame that doubles most punishments, and that increases with them. Very often it serves no purpose. What good does it do to disgrace a man who is no longer to live in the society of his peers and who has more than abundantly proved by his behaviour that more fearful threats have failed to deter him? To disgrace him is understandable when there is not other punishment available, or as a supplement to some comparatively trivial material penalty. Where this is not the case punishment does the same task twice over. (Durkheim 1984:47)

The famous quote from Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* comes to mind. She writes of the experience of re-emerging into society after a long period of stigmatizing institutionalization, “There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice patched, retreaded and approved for the road…” (Plath 1999). There is no dearth of rituals for shaming in the process of imprisonment. Prisoners who embrace Christianity and Islam, however, have an opportunity for ritualized redemption, a chance to be “born twice.” Perhaps it would be possible to conceive of similar rituals of forgiveness that are not based in faith.

Our criminal justice system does several things that are likely to worsen an offender’s likelihood for success after release. The regretful absence of practical supports for returning felons is covered very thoroughly elsewhere (Petersilia 2003), and more
supportive programs are clearly called for. But hearing the stories of these exceptional individuals who turned the prison experience into a transformative event helps us to see what we can do to potentially improve that. Mechanisms for forgiveness and self-worth appear to have been very significant to the participants in this study, as do the interpersonal bonds that are built in a trusting community. These things are not necessarily limited to faith-based programs, and should be considered as model elements of secular programs as well.

But what we should not do when we underscore the importance of secular love, moral communities and reintegrative shaming is to pit it against belief as the salient factor that prevents deviance, because of course, for these former felons, they work together. Believing in God’s plan, heaven, hell, etc., requires a leap of faith and faith, as noted, is fragile.

**Including God**

Using social theory to understand faith conversion (particularly rational choice theory, from which we have pulled concepts in the preceding pages), runs the risk of denying the experience of the religious convert. As Steve Bruce notes, a rational choice analysis can have “little resonance with the understandings of the people whose behavior it must explain” (Bruce 1993:200). Paul Knepper thinks there’s no place in sociology in general for measuring religiosity (Knepper 2003). Cullen and Sundt make a compelling argument that Knepper is wrong (Cullen and Sundt 2003), but there is an important point, which is that the social scientist has to be careful not to invalidate and dismiss an aspect of what the subject reports, just because it doesn’t
fit into a theoretical perspective or a narrow definition of what social science involves. In other words, as mentioned earlier, sociology tends to study religion with a secular bias.

Above, I listed the practical knowledge we have gained from this study, lessons that can be applied in secular contexts. Distilling the practical lessons out of the dialogue, extracting them from their religion-imbued language, is necessary if this study is to have any concrete value. But we can’t forget that the role of God, perceived or real, is essential in the stories of participants, and deserves some mention. For them, faith choices were not just a matter of cost and benefit, social disorder and social control, but involved divine intervention. Participants tell of how God plucked them off their path, as a part of His plan. We cannot simply exclude this sort of data because it doesn’t sound immediately sociological. It means something to the people in the study, and there might be something valuable there.

In the stories below, we see that many of our participants believe that God acted directly in their lives, a vital piece in their ability to turn their lives around. It is important to acknowledge that it wasn’t just through a rational weighing of costs and benefits that they made their choice to become a Christian or a Muslim, but because God’s direct action in their lives as a benevolent force makes them feel worthy, important and good. This sense of their own goodness steels them against the temptations and pressures of their former selves.
Generally speaking, participants take a good deal of comfort in God’s control in their lives, particularly in regard to the “uncontrollable contingency” that prison presented.

In Islam, the concept that life is predestined is key and comforts both Rachid Abdullah and Khadijah Perkins.

In Islam we hear that our path is written 15000 years before we are conceived. Going to prison was just part of the process. – Rachid Abdullah

[The best thing about being a Muslim is] the knowledge that you’re not in control, that God is in control, that you don’t have to take on the burden of the world. The desire to be a righteous God-fearing human being, to live your life as God planned it for you, and not as you think, doing anything and everything that comes to your mind. Direction. Given direction that you can follow for life. – Khadijah Perkins

Christians also take comfort in God’s divine plan, as we saw earlier as they discussed how prison had been a positive experience. Here both David Ringer and another Catholic inmate writing a letter to his spiritual advisor make reference to this.

I believe my life has been structured and planned out by a higher power. That power said, you were supposed to be here [in prison]. – David Ringer

I am so scared because it isn’t my will to be deported. I made mistake, yes, I admit it, I asked forgiveness to the Federal Government. Waiting for mercy (asylum) to be granted. But again I put my faith and trust to the care of God the most high. I couldn’t see His picture yet, but I am sure there is a purpose and plan for me that I don’t know yet. I prayed everyday for the mercy, I hope I will received. It is like a glass of cold water in a hot summer day; and I am so thirsty to have it. – Letter from Catholic inmate May 2002.

Ja’far Saadiq also sees God’s plan, and in it he sees his own role as an instrument of God.

A spiritual awakening that I came to [made me hopeful]. I was convinced that God doesn’t bless individuals with that kind of understanding, just to die with it. So I was convinced that the awakening that I’d had, and the transformation I was
undergoing could be a benefit to others, more than just myself, and I didn’t think that God would allow me to die with this kind of understanding that I had been enriched with as a result of these books, and the scripture and the prophets and all of these things. And some people actually told me that I was a little spacey and that I was trippin’, and not really rational, but I was clear that I couldn’t see how God would do that… I feel a sense of indebtedness. I still work with the prisons. I go and visit. I help individuals who are coming out, and I try to be a good example for people who have made mistakes in their life, and to have an opportunity to redeem theirselves. And I try to let my example be at least a door-opener for others who may be confronted with criminal kinds of adversities. – Ja’far Saadiq

Meredith Buchanan uses more animated language to describe not only that her incarceration was part of God’s plan, but that He intervened directly in her life.

What happened for me is I was taken from away from an age running headlong into its inevitable cataclysm. You know, I was like a locomotive. I was an eight-track train all headed in the same direction. And I was given this pluck off. God plucked me off the tracks and took my eight parts and melted me into one solidified love of God. Had I not had that opportunity to have a view of what my life is, and to get a grasp of what some of my opportunities that are afforded me are… I think that those things were life-changing in a beneficial way. Do I think that people need to go to prison to have a spiritual awakening and turn their lives around? Some. Most not. – Meredith Buchanan

Muslims, Protestants and Catholics all hold some tenets in common, including a belief in a divine plan. But while the comments from Muslims and Catholics do not expound much on God’s role in their lives beyond that, Born Again Christians understand their faith in terms of personal relationship. Jesus Christ becomes the personal savior of someone who is born again in Him. As such, God takes a more personal role in their lives, and can intervene through miracles. For Bill Roberts,

God’s intervention saved his life on the prison yard everyday.

There were still challenges. There are the challenges of living in prison… If I step on somebody’s toe, literally, you can be shanked easily. You say the wrong thing; you be in the wrong spot, somebody is trying to do a dope deal on the yard and you walk past it, you just became a liability… [My relationship with God]
helped because I knew things before they occurred...a time or two my sense
would be don’t go [that way]. “Oh, OK.” I’d turn around and head back for
quarters. Next thing you know, they call it hitting the deuces, the alarm, the
alarm’s going off and somebody got stabbed right where I was about to walk past.
That kept me out of the liability range. Other times, because I do have a smart
mouth and I didn’t work well with authority...I had a competition with a
Lieutenant on the compound, and what came out of my mouth was not the words
that I was speaking in my head. And I mulled over that for a very long time and
all that I could determine with that was the Holy Spirit speaking for me to keep
my rear-end out of trouble. I have no doubt that my prayer life increased a
thousand fold on that compound. I was praying every 5 minutes or so. “Oh God
help me!”...I just didn’t want to be involved in everything that was going on on
that yard. – Bill Roberts

Later, after he had been released, God intervened in Bill’s life again, by speaking to
him personally and directly.

God told me to go to school, audibly. Audibly. I knew I wanted to go to school.
I couldn’t get in anywhere...I’m sitting there enrolling in stuff I’d talked to the
advisor. It was 9 o’clock in the morning the window opens at 11 to register. I’m
standing on Market street, walking around checking things out and going, “I don’t
know about this. Should I really do this?” And He said, “Yes, move forward.”
...And I was like, OK I heard this and there’s nobody near me and I didn’t say it.
Because I heard it from behind me. It didn’t come from my mouth which is in
front of me. – Bill Roberts

For Dan Tucker, also a Born Again Christian, God’s intervention prevented him from
killing someone.

We weren’t there to hurt people, we just wanted their money. Well, we were at a
bar a dinner club type place. There was a guy that was drunk. I figured out pretty
quickly that one of the cocktail waitresses was his girlfriend and he was waiting
for her to get off shift. But he was drunk. We would always, whoever had the
short gun would work the cash register and whoever had the high caliber rifle or
shotgun, I had...a heavy weapon, a deer-hunter rifle, I mean it’s a horrible thing.
And this guy started walking on me, and started to make a move to grab the barrel
of that rifle, it’s a big gun. And I was about one second away from blowing him
away. And I have no doubt at this point in time. I know that God intervened.
The guy just, something happened to him and he just got really docile and he just
walked away. The guy didn’t show a lick of sense prior to that and he was
aggressive and drunk. And all of a sudden his whole demeanor just changed and
he just backed up and it never came to anything. But it shook me up because my
crime partner and I, if anyone tried to stop us, I was going to shoot him. I mean you can’t go into a situation like that and not have made some commitment, or else they’re going to get killed and kill a whole bunch of people in more stupid ways than that. So I was going to shoot the guy. I was starting a countdown in my head. If this guy gets this close, it’s over...So I had to deal afterwards. I thought about that a lot of times you know and I always had a sense of God interceding so that I never killed anybody...I was kind of amazed that the guy went limp on me. It didn’t make any sense...So I just had a sense, always did and always will, that God had just done something to keep me from hurting somebody in the foolishness I was doing. – Dan Tucker

Note how Dan frames this incident as God’s hand in his life, not in the life of the man he would have killed. It is because Dan is important to God that He intervenes.

Similarly, Tommy Iglesias tells a story about when he was first saved, before his experience of being born again in prison. In this story, Tommy is so important to God that He will use Tommy’s brother to get Tommy’s attention; the congregation will pray to save Tommy; and God will save Tommy but not his friend.

Like I said, I stopped going to church when I was young. What happened is in 1986 I had been dealing a lot of drugs, was robbing a lot of connections, and all that stuff, right? And I made it so bad for myself that I’d have to carrying a gun on me on the streets...My brother even told me, “Hey, you can’t be doing these things, Man. I got the word, Man. They’re going to end up taking care of you one of these days. They’re going to either give you some bad dope or they’re going to do something to you, or they’re going to do something to one of our family members. So you gotta stop!” I figured because I had my little clan of criminals nobody could touch me...And here I was such a young punk, right. Here I was putting my family at risk, not caring about nobody, self-centered and selfish. And on dope. My other brother, he was going to church, right? But he was going to church for the wrong reasons, but God used him to catch my attention.

Tommy identifies that his life was out of control. He also identifies that his brother was going to church for the wrong reasons, but that God used him to get Tommy’s attention nevertheless. The implication here is that Tommy is pretty important to God.
My brother was having trouble in his marriage, so he was going to church. And what he did – he saw that my life was in turmoil, the way I was living, right? So what he did, he submitted my name to his church, and they started praying for me. While I was out there in the streets, doing all these things, right? Hustling and running with dope and doing this and robbing and pilfering, and enforcing and doing all these other little things that criminals are supposed to do, right? I started feeling scared. After my brother had invited me to church, I started feeling this fear, like everything was catching up with me. I felt all of a sudden like I was going to die, like everything I was doing was going to catch up with me and I was going to have to pay. And then my brother came back and said “We’re having this revival at my church with music.” And I love music… So I took a chance and I went to church, right? Before they started the music part, the preacher got up and started preaching on giving your life over to Christ. Surrendering yourself… I felt he was talking about me. So it became so convicting that I had to get up and leave. [I left because] it was convicting and I wasn’t living right. The spirit of God convicts you. See, God had a calling on my life… He was unveiling, He was unveiling my life before me. He was talking about me – I felt He was directly talking to me. But, see, I know now that the Spirit of God searches the deep things, and… that pertains to the heart and mind of a person. He searches you, continuously…

Here, Tommy uses court-derived terminology to describe the experience of going to church that day – he felt as if the preacher and God Himself were “convicting” him, as in a court of law. But the main point here is that in “convicting” him specifically, both God and the preacher were paying Tommy a fair amount of individual attention, underscoring Tommy’s importance.

My brother convinced me to go to this service, and that whole week I didn’t go out. God was making me fearful because the people in that church, they were praying, and God was answering their prayers. He was delivering me. He was setting up my future. Through their faith in God – they were calling upon the Lord to touch my life, right? And I was being translated, even to this present day right now, I know many men of faith right now who are praying for me. Their prayers are sustaining me. They’re in prisons and they’re everywhere… So what happened was, me and Raul, we were supposed go to Sunday service, right? So that whole week, what I did was, because I didn’t want to go out there and I didn’t want to party; I didn’t want to get myself involved in anything; I started reading the Bible, like priming. You know how one prepares himself? I wanted to prepare myself, because if I was going to go in there this time I wanted to go in there knowing, understanding. And I wanted to know if this presence that I felt in the church was omnipresent, if I could reach God at anytime. So I went up into
the mountains, because I have a lot of pride – I didn’t want nobody to see me; I didn’t want nobody to know that I was reading the Bible...I borrowed my mother’s Bible – I guess you could call stealing it – I put it in my pocket...and I rode up into the mountains...and I got down and I started imitating the people in the church. And I started lifting my hands and asking if in the Name of Jesus, you know, grant me the understanding of His word. You know, that if He would show me, and that if He would show me. I didn’t really know where to go in the Bible, but for some reason it started talking to me, and I couldn’t even read that well, cause I wasn’t really educated, but when I – something about when I get the Word of God it’s a whole different thing...

The prayers of that congregation and of the men in prison signify Tommy’s importance to other people, as well. But it is the power of God’s direct intervention in his life that is the point of Tommy’s story.

Saturday night came, and that was the day before I was supposed to go to church, so for sure I stayed home, right? I said “I’m not going out. I promised my brother and this time I’m going to keep my word and I’m going to church.” So all that week I’d been priming myself and reading and when I lifted my hands, I felt something. I wasn’t in that building and I didn’t have to look around...I felt something. When I came off that mountain, I felt like, “Man!” I was able to see. And as I approached this store, this guy that used to sell cocaine he approached me and said, “Hey, Bro, check this out – I got some blow. Check it out; check out the quality.” And I looked at it and I looked at him...and I told him, “Naw, that’s all right, Bro.” Cause I was feeling so good, I felt like I was free, I felt like I was free. I stood in Saturday night, right? I stood in. And my partner Raul came by and said to me, “Hey, Bro, check this out. Do you want to come to a party with me in Pacifica?” I said, “No...I gotta be at church at 9 o’clock. Why don’t you just stay home, cause you said you were going to go?” And he said, “Naw, I think I’ll be able to handle it.” Like I told you I was scared – I don’t know why, I was feeling scared about going out, right? It was something that was – God was actually saving my life for this day and for the days to come. Raul made a conscientious decision to go to that party, right? Knowing that he might not go to church in the morning, taking it for granted...I didn’t go, but he went, and that night, he was met by an adversarial group of guys, like a gang of guys from [another neighborhood], and the outcome of that was that he was stabbed 18 times, and beaten with baseball bats and he was murdered that evening. And I wasn’t murdered, and I was spared...I remember coming back from church that day I stopped by his house, and I was going to ask him, “Where what happened? How come you didn’t –” I wanted to go over there and tell him, “You missed something good.”... When I walked up there, the whole front yard was full of people, family members and...a lot of guys from our barrio were all right there. His brother approached me crying. He said, “My brother Raul got stabbed last
night – he got murdered.” The first thing that went through my mind was that
God had made provisions for me not to die that way. Although I was sorry to
hear about it, I was grateful to God that I wasn’t there. That fear that was put in
my heart was put there for a reason – Tommy Iglesias

We recall from an earlier chapter that Tommy’s contact with church outside of prison
didn’t change his behavior, as he also told us that he spent his entire prison term from
1986-1992 high, but his sense of God’s hand in his life remains current in his
understanding of the world and of his life. Back in 1986 God saved him through the
prayers of the congregation and through the fear He instilled in him. And Tommy
heeded the warning, while his buddy did not and perished. In this story, God bestows
upon Tommy status as special and redeemable and that status helps Tommy believe
in his ability to go though life without re-offending. Unlike Tommy, Sandra Pacheco
has never used drugs or been rearrested since being incarcerated and born again. But,
like Tommy, God used other people to reach her and save her.

It was a really huge miracle in my life. I was [locked up]. My husband was in
San Quentin. He had gotten a letter that his 7 year old daughter had been drug by
a commuter train. He wrote me this letter saying that it didn’t matter what I was
going to do [but] he was going to get out and go to a program. I was a trustee and
I was in this laundry room and I was reading this letter and I was really crying my
heart out. Just like, I don’t know what to do here. He’s going to a program? I
don’t know if I can go to a program. I don’t know if I can get clean. I’ve been
using drugs my whole life. He had wrote that this isn’t the end, it’s only the end
if I can’t get off drugs. So I sat in that laundry room and really just cried. And
then all of a sudden, and I mean out of nowhere, this lady appears in the laundry
room and she says, “Can I pray with you?” Well, nobody else in that laundry
room would have heard me say “God, if you’re real, I need you to come and I
need you to come now, cause I don’t know what I’m doing and I’m scared.”
(chokes up) And out of nowhere she was right there. And she began to pray with
me. And she asked me my name, and she already knew what I was hurting about.
It was so – I never believed in miracles; I never believed in anything like that…I
didn’t even realize then that it was a divine intervention from God. He loved me
that much that he would send someone in my deepest, deepest time of need. She
sat there and prayed with me…She was coming in to bring in a Bible study.
When they let her in - the laundry room is right off that slider - well, from the
tower the tower guard can see everything that’s going on down that hallway. Well, someone had to blind that tower guard in order for her to get in that laundry room, pray with me, and get out, and walk up to that tower, without them arresting her. She got in that laundry room, prayed with me, hugged me, told me Jesus loved me, and got out of that laundry room without the tower guard ever seeing it...They would have arrested her. You can’t have one-on-one contact like that with an inmate... I had no idea that God cared about me. No idea. I thought He only cared about people who obeyed Him and did everything right and went to church. I had this whole different concept of who He was. – Sandra Pacheco

God sent that Christian volunteer to answer Sandra’s prayer, and made sure that the tower guard could not see as she dipped into the laundry room to visit her. Miracles like this one and the others are crucial to how these participants now see themselves, their lives, and God. We could very easily see these ex-inmates ascribing their incarceration to God as a coping mechanism, which would be quite consistent with sociological theory that explains religious behavior and beliefs as false consciousness, theodicy and compensators (Marx and Engels 1964; Weber 1976; Stark and Bainbridge 1996). In fact, Stark and Finke’s rational choice theory offers a tidy explanation for mystical experiences, which is that they increase confidence and plausibility of the faith when such stories are recounted to others (Stark and Finke 2000:110-111).

This may indeed be true, but it also represents a serious pitfall of rational choice theory. First of all, it is important that an analysis not completely lack verisimilitude to the lived experiences of the people whose experiences it documents (Fine, Weis, et al. 2003), and it is unlikely that these participants would recognize their discussions of God as mechanisms for increasing plausibility. Further, framing their interactions with their God in this instrumental way could be outright insulting to the participants.
Moreover, if sociology were to be satisfied with that answer, we would never ask why it matters so much to them that God intervened in their lives. This question seems worth asking, especially as one answer stands out from the stories above: God’s intervention allowed them to feel worthy for the first time, and more important than they had ever felt before.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this project has been to consider the following two questions: “How and why do prison inmates seek and find faith?” and “Why does it matter?” In this study, we have looked at both Islam and Christianity as they are practiced in the prison, and found that they offer different challenges and present different appeals in the special context of the prison, where social rules are singularly peculiar. Despite their differences, Islam and Christianity produce some similar outcomes for adherents in prison: submission to authority, a sense of love and community, and, perhaps most importantly, a chance to begin again. They also both require significant sacrifices for the prisoner that may help to explain patterns of religious involvement that appear at once higher and lower than one would expect.

We also learned that there appear to be different things going on in men’s and women’s prisons vis-à-vis religion. Explanations for these differences are likely to be rooted in the sociological precept that women are more relational, but at this point these explanations are speculative. These data show that this area would be a very rich topic for further investigation, perhaps allowing a more intricate understanding of gender differences in religiosity than past literature has provided.
So, in answer to the first question, prisoners find religion when they are faced with isolation and desperation, usually through an advocate, and as a source of hope and comfort. They participate despite some obstacles, or they drop out. If they do commit they commit with fervor, in order to overcome the cognitive dissonance they may have felt in working so hard against the challenges they faced. They then may find themselves deeply involved in a new community, where their relationships are closer than the others in their lives, and where they feel a sense of belonging and moral accountability. In this context, they are forgiven their sins and allowed to start over, as new souls.

It is undoubtedly true that some benefits from faith involvement are things that do not need to be linked to faith, like forgiveness, love, community, job assistance, and the like, and that new and productive policy could potentially be formed around these findings. But looking closely, we also see that part of what happened in the lives of these ex-prisoners who embraced faith and carried it into their post-prison lives had to do specifically with the divine. Belief in the power of God in their own lives and the special status that He bestows upon them by intervening directly in their lives are important elements.

Why all of this matters is because, for the most part, these prisoners are eventually released. Upon release, their new resolve is truly challenged. In meeting the challenge, they adopt roles of service and altruism. These roles not only demonstrate
that they have turned their value systems on their heads, they may actually help to keep them afloat in their new resolve. Service gives them an opportunity to enact their new values, or their “generative script” (Maruna 2001) everyday. But it takes more than new values and moral resolve. These things, it turns out, are fleeting, and must be nurtured constantly and supported externally by practical means.

Backsliding is typical of both faith conversion and crime desistance, and is common in the histories of many offenders and about half of this study’s 18 former felons. Success depends on jobs and practical supports that faith membership sometimes provide, but that a psycho-spiritual state alone cannot effect. Which brings us back to our history lesson on the assumptions around moral transformation.

Discussions of morality are unavoidable as we consider criminal offending, especially as we consider religion’s effects upon a criminally offending population. This makes intuitive sense because taking a gun to someone’s head, stabbing a store clerk in the gut, breaking into a home and binding the inhabitants with duct-tape (all offenses these participants committed) raise questions of morality. But people usually don’t develop into criminal offenders in a vacuum. “Nothing works” was concluded in the 1970’s in regard to prison rehabilitation programs (Martinson 1974; Lipton, Martinson et al. 1975), probably prematurely. But the finding that the rehabilitative efforts were not producing consistently measurable results is not particularly astonishing, really. How could anything that worked only on the psyche of the offender, but did not change his or her life circumstances, job prospects or community surroundings, be expected to have a lasting effect? Perhaps the phrase
that inadvertently snapped shut the public purse for any sort of rehabilitative programming for the incarcerated could be re-phrased, “nothing works alone.”

Religion should not be expected to work alone, either. Many of the successful religious converts in our study got material help, jobs, clothes, parole transfer, shelter, etc. usually from their faith groups upon release. Sometimes they were not sufficient, but without this help who knows if the spiritual transformations for many of our participants would have stuck. So we must not take the results of this study and become over-reliant on notions of religion as salvation. Whether it is publicly funded or donated, Islamic or Christian, male or female, we should not expect religion to work to fix criminals, relying on the manifestly faulty assumption that by locking people up and fixing their morality we will fix the problem of crime. Economic opportunity and well-being is consistently correlated with reduced crime rates (Currie 1998), and employment is the closest correlate to resisting recidivism (Bushway and Reuter 2002; Petersilia 2003).

Here we have evidence that moral transformation can happen, and that when it does, sometimes the result is not just a law-abiding citizen, but a generous, even altruistic individual. This is a valuable finding, and certainly we should take the information from this study to promote a prison environment that fosters the things that were helpful for our participants, including but not limited to faith. For instance, participant testimony showed us that rituals of forgiveness were a meaningful part of what made them able to re-enter society. The data also confirmed that being
embedded in a moral community helped these felons to adopt a new approach to life. And being involved in service helped them maintain this new approach. So, why not form programs around these insights, with rituals of forgiveness, consistent community involvement and opportunities for giving back? I think we should. But even as we do so, we cannot forget that the conditions to which criminal offenders return when they leave prison are likely to set them back off the path they began to forge while incarcerated, and that the most powerful prison program, faith-based or secular, does not stand much of a chance of transforming prisoners if it doesn’t offer them substantial support when they get out.
Appendix 2: Participant Profiles
In Alphabetical Order:

Rachid Abdullah – I met Rachid at a coffee house for our interview. He is an African American man in his fifties who currently runs an Islamic social services network. He was raised in a Southern Baptist home, but never quite felt comfortable with it. When the Nation of Islam was gaining popularity in the 1960s, he became involved in that. He liked the message it had about “picking people up from the gutter,” but when Elijah Muhammad died and his son took the movement in the direction of Orthodox Islam, Rachid left. He went to prison in 1975 on narcotics charges, which is where he started to really learn about Islam. In prison, he had a “need for spiritual enrichment,” and reading the Qur’an filled that need better than the Nation ever had. Rachid felt he could always justify his crimes when he was in the Nation – this was not so when he practiced Islam in an orthodox way. After less than two years in prison, he emerged as a “model citizen.” It was not a desire to avoid returning to prison that prompted his new-found law-abidance, but simply “staying in accord” with Islam. There were no Islamic support services available for him when he got out, so in 2000, Rachid developed this network of Islamic wrap-around social services for returning felons. His mother and some other family members had a hard time with his decision to embrace Islam, although he is still close with them. He is estranged, however, from his wife and children from the time of his incarceration. Rachid differs from the rest of the ex-felons who participated in this study in that he is married to someone who does not share his faith.

Jose Arboles – Jose went to prison in 1979 for an armed robbery he maintains he did not commit. He served six years and was released at age thirty-two. Today he is fifty-nine and working at a Protestant church as a youth activity director. He has never had any problems with drugs, before, during or after his time in prison, and his family remained supportive and close to him throughout the ordeal of prison. Jose was raised in a Latino, Roman Catholic household and has always considered himself to be a man of faith. He grew closer to his faith during his incarceration and emerged with little interest in “religion” but a rich “relationship” with God, no longer calling himself a Catholic. We met at his office, which is housed in a church and decorated with photographs the youth with whom he works. Unlike many of the ex-felons I interviewed, who wear their criminal past prominently, as a testament to God’s forgiveness and their dramatic redemption, Jose chooses not to tell most of his co-workers about his criminal record. The thing that got him through the hard days of prison and the trials of trying to make a life as an ex-felon was the desire “to prove to everybody that they made a mistake” in arresting and convicting him over a crime he did not commit.

Meredith Buchanan – Meredith is a white woman in her late forties. Meredith’s grandfather was a Methodist who would take her to church when she was small. But when she was around seven, she was abducted by her father and never saw those family members again. She joined a spiritual community led by an interfaith guru in 1969 when she was 14. She refers to this community,
with which she is still loosely associated, as “the family.” She has some issues with mental illness and began to use and abuse drugs when she was just a teenager. She first went to prison in 1989, then again in 1993 for bank robbery. In prison, she began to investigate her spirituality and found her bond to Christianity to be stronger than any other, although she did explore Buddhist meditation and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. At the suggestion of another inmate, she ended up going on the Kairos retreat, which is where she had a “spiritual awakening.” She became part of a spiritual community in the prison. When she was released in 1995, she became involved in Kairos Outside and she joined Narcotics Anonymous, which were both supportive communities. Nevertheless, she had some difficulties finding stable housing when she came out. She now works as a taxi driver and has close relationships with about half of her family members, and strained relationships with the other half. She attends Episcopalian services every week, because that is where she has found friends, but she doesn’t know if she is an Episcopalian. She is a Christian.

Jeffrey Curtis – Jeffrey was raised in and out of churches, from the Catholic Church to various Protestant sects. His stepfather was extremely physically and sexually abusive. As soon as he could, Jeffrey dropped out of high school, joined the US Army, and eventually began to abuse drugs. In 1989 he went to prison for crimes he did not disclose (and I did not press), and he was released in 1997. He was introduced to the Lord his first night in prison by his elderly Black cellmate who handed him a Bible and began to disabuse him of his racist ideas (Jeffrey described himself as having been a “downright racist white boy”). Jeffrey is not close to the family or friends he had before he went to prison, but has developed family-like relationships with members of his Christian community. He has established his own Non-denominational Christian community church, and feels his calling is to work with offenders, ex-offenders and would-be offenders. He lives and works on building the church in a small, studio apartment with another ex-felon who was saved in prison. It was in this studio over a cup of strong coffee that he told me his tearful and emotional tale.

Abdul Haddad – Abdul admits that when he first started going to Islamic services in prison it was just to get off work. But reading interpretations of the Qur’an eventually “grabbed” him. He was in federal prison on a drug charge in 1990 when he first began attending jumah. He was released in 1991, although he was arrested again for drug sales in 1998. He hesitated to take shahadah because while he was interested in Islam, he was not yet willing to abandon his profession as a drug merchant, and he knew there was a contradiction there. Abdul is African American and while his parents had been raised Christian, Abdul had been raised without formal religion. He says he had some religious instruction and a belief in God. He is still close with his mother and siblings, one of whom is also Muslim. Embracing Islam did not create a rift in his family, but he says that now the Muslim community is his family. Now that he is out of prison it is harder to be a Muslim – there are many temptations and he has less time for prayer. But he is taking classes to
learn Arabic and enjoys attending Friday jumah services. He had no need for any financial assistance when he left prison, but has benefited from membership in the Muslim community. He is married to a Muslim woman (Jameelah Haddad) who was also in prison. During our interview, the phone rang several times. Each time he answered, "as-salam-alaikum."

**Jameelah Haddad** – Jameelah was raised in a Christian home with parents who were “very religious.” Her first exposure to Islam was to the Nation of Islam, which did not appeal to her. It was 1984, and she was invited to the prison jumah services, but she was a practicing Christian and was not interested in the racially-divisive message of the Nation. Even though she was black, Islam as a “black religion” struck her as “just not right.” Jameelah went in and out of prison several times and in 1992 she began to see Islam differently, by the example of the Sunni inmates and visiting volunteers around her. She took her shahadah in 1997, although she went back to prison in 1998. She was released in 2001 and is currently on parole, working at an inner-city day-shelter for women. Her choice to embrace Islam confused her family, with whom she is still close, but she feels closer to her Muslim family. Jameelah struggles against her “worldly desires,” but she assures me and herself that, “it will be all right.” Jameelah is in her early forties, married to a Muslim man (Abdul Haddad), and studying to become a nurse.

**Ali Hassan** – Between 1984 and 1994, Ali served five sentences, primarily for drug-related crimes. He was raised as a Methodist but was not very religious before his incarceration. He had been exposed to some of the Black Muslims in the community when he was young, but he had never really gotten involved, although aspects of it appealed to him. He accepted Islam in 1985 in prison, and has considered himself to be a Muslim the whole time, despite his continued run-ins with the law. In 1993, he was serving a two-year sentence and realized that there were contradictions between his professed faith and his lifestyle and decided he needed to choose a path. Being incarcerated gave him time to reflect. When he was released from that last sentence, he got a job through a Muslim connection. He currently works at a secular residential re-entry program for felons, a job that was also facilitated by his connection to the Muslim community. Ali is in his late forties; he is not married; and he considers himself not to have many close friends.

**Tommy Iglesias** – Tommy is currently in a residential drug-treatment program. He is a Latino man in his mid-forties. He has a long history of gang involvement, drug abuse, drug sales, violent crime and property crime, and has been in and out of prison since he was a teenager. He was raised Catholic, but currently identifies as “Christian,” emphasizing relationship rather than religion. His spiritual journey has involved many relapses into drug abuse and crime, and each time he goes back to prison his “walk with Christ” resumes. At times, when he has returned to his neighborhood and his family, they have not responded well to his faith, telling him that he was “too holy” for them. He attributes his relapses in to crime, at least in part, to the lack of support he has felt when he has tried to turn over a new leaf. Right now he is working on his substance abuse issues in this residential program, and he his hopeful. He
believes that true tranquility comes through relationship with God, and that he
can be free even in prison as long as he has faith. In fact, he says he has been
freer in prison than he has been out.

**Jerome Ingles** – Jerome had always been Christian, but later he realized that it had
only been “in title.” He is an African American man in his mid-forties. He
was released from prison in 2000 from a 13-year sentence – it was not his
first, but his longest prison term. In 1970 or so, Jerome really started to
experience his “blackness,” and began to act out in rebellious ways, using
drugs, petty gang-related crimes, and eventually armed robbery. In prison he
began associating with some of the Christians, and their kindness began to
affect him. Eventually, he became very involved in the Christian community
in prison and began attending classes through a Bible college that ran a
program at the prison. When he left prison, he relied heavily on the support
offered to him by the Christian community. He continued in seminary, met
and married a Christian woman, and was ordained last year as a Non-
denominational Christian minister. He currently works at a Baptist church.
Jerome was recommended to me for my study by a prison chaplain and by a
Prison Fellowship Ministry staffer as an outstanding example of someone who
found faith in prison.

**Shane Johnston** – Shane is an African American man, approximately fifty years old.
He was raised primarily by his devoutly Baptist father, but rebelled against his
home life early on, and ended up abusing alcohol and drugs and engaging in
violence as a juvenile. At age seventeen, he was imprisoned for his part in a
robbery that turned into a murder. While he did not stab the victim, he handed
the knife to his cousin who did. Shane had a conversation with God early on
in his prison term, and during his incarceration he got more and more serious
about his faith. By the time he left prison at age twenty-three, after serving
six years, he was ready for the seminary. He credits having moved to a
county several hours from his hometown as a crucial factor in successfully
studying, working and having family soon after his release from prison. I met
him at the Charismatic Pentecostal church where he is pastor, not terribly far
from that hometown. There he told me that he has now mended his
relationship with his father and that he has been a pastor for the past couple of
decades, ministering to inmates, former inmates, and the general community.

**Nick McDonnell** – Nick’s mother had been Catholic, and his father Presbyterian, but
they didn’t raise him to be religious. He went to prison in 1992 on charges of
lewd and lascivious acts with a minor. The conviction ruined his marriage
and he lost most of his friends. In prison he felt extremely remorseful and
suicidal. He began to talk to God, to help him through the misery and fear of
his new life, and that is how he began to slowly open up to reading the Bible
and talking to the religious volunteers. A Catholic volunteer began visiting
Nick, and he began attending both Catholic and Protestant services. Because
of its “rich tradition” and its less “looney” approach, Nick chose to commit to
the Catholic church. He was released in 1998 and since then has found
gainful employment and remarried. Unlike the other participants, Nick was
college educated before his conviction, and had no criminal record prior to the
charges that sent him to prison for six years. While he was assisted by his
spiritual community in terms of a change of parole, his ability to find work
after release had more to do with his prior experience, his education, and luck.

Sandra Pacheco – Sandra was raised Catholic, but she stopped going to mass when
she was 15. She is a Latina woman in her late forties who suffered family
abuse when she was younger. For twenty-five years she was an intravenous
drug-user. She and her husband used and abused drugs together, and he even
“took some cases” for her and did more hard prison time than she did. It was
at her husband’s behest that she began to investigate Christianity in a serious
way. They were both incarcerated at the time, and in communication through
letters. He had found Christ and wanted her to do the same. She was running
drugs where she was and had a comfortable life, and she began attending
Bible study despite her reluctance to embrace it fully. In solitary confinement
she finally had a serious conversation with God and changed her life. She has
never used or looked back since, while her husband had to relapse and go
back to jail before he could join her in her dedication to the faith. In 1995 she
was released into a residential drug-rehab program with the help of a religious
volunteer she met while she was locked up. She eventually got a job with the
help of her aunt, and has held it ever since. As a volunteer, she runs the
program into which she was released eight years ago. She and her husband
are still married, both clean and both (Non-denominational) Christians.

Khadijah Perkins – Khadijah was twenty-nine years old when she went to federal
prison, twenty years ago. She has been out of prison for one year and is
working at a secular non-profit agency that serves people who are
transitioning out of prison. She embraced Islam early on in her prison term,
with the help of a doctor who gave her a Qur’an. Prior to receiving the
Qur’an, she had been praying, asking God for direction. Her own faith
background had been Baptist as a child, but not very religious just prior to her
prison term. Khadijah is an African American woman who is described by
her friends and by the Muslim volunteers who visited her in prison as “quiet”
and “very involved” in Islam. From the time she entered prison to the time
she left, many more women joined the Muslim community and joined the
“fight” for their “religious rights,” a fight that became more of an issue for
prison administrators as the numbers grew. In the past year, Khadijah has
found a masjid that she attends regularly, and has married a Muslim man. We
met in her office at the non-profit which employs two other former felons.

David Ringer – David converted to Catholicism in prison. He had grown up
Methodist, but had never been very involved in the faith. In the 1970s he had
converted to Judaism but lost his enthusiasm for that in the mid-eighties. He
did not discuss the criminal charges for which he went to prison, except to say
that prior to his three-year state prison term he had worked in security for the
county and that it was a “shock to end up on the other side of the fence.”
Some of his family relationships were severed because of the incarceration.
While in prison he was attracted to the Catholic faith because the people were
“loving” and “wonderful” and because of the ritual. He though converting to
Catholicism would provide a support network. After release he was
confirmed in the faith and began to volunteer for RCIA, the instructional course for Catholic conversion, but in the past two years his church attendance has dropped off. He is disappointed in the Catholic Church because of the recent scandals involving priests and sexual abuse and is himself in a "spiritual upheaval." A secular non-profit helped him find a job in 1994, when he was released, and he has held it ever since. David is a white man around fifty.

**Bill Roberts** – Bill began to go jail at age eighteen on charges involving drugs, auto theft, and other "small stuff." He was raised Roman Catholic, from which he had long drifted when he found himself at age thirty facing a federal prison term for drug sales. He has also committed some armed robberies for which he was not ever convicted. Bill is a white man, about forty. He served only 5 years, but at the beginning of his sentence it looked like it would be up to four times that, which is when he began to search in the Bible for answers. He is now in school and working at a real estate office, although California state law will prevent him from being a licensed real estate agent. His dream is to be a lawyer. He attends an Assemblies of God church, but identifies simply as a Christian. He volunteers regularly for Prison Fellowship Ministries. We met at a noisy Mexican restaurant for our interview, which was at times tearful.

**Ja’far Saadiq** – Ja’far was raised as a Baptist. He became involved in drug use and “criminal activities related to substance abuse.” He went to death row at age 19 for murder. In 1970 he was the youngest man on death row, he was feeling remorseful and looking for a way to better himself. He had been exposed to the Nation of Islam because his brother was involved in it, so he took his time in prison to become more familiar and more involved. Auspiciously, California commuted the death sentences of all death row inmates in 1972 when the state Supreme Court declared capital punishment unconstitutional. A few years later, Elijah Muhammad died and the Nation turned into a movement of Orthodox Islam. Ja’far stayed with it and began to practice according to the five pillars of Islam. He became very active in the Muslim community in prison, got time off for good behavior, and was paroled after serving only nine years. He emerged from prison with a sense of indebtedness, having narrowly escaped a worse fate, and dedicated himself to the faith and to the service of others. He married shortly after his release to a woman who also became Muslim. Ja’far is now in his early fifties and is an imam and a prominent leader in the Muslim community.

**Dan Tucker** – Dan’s family was originally Baptist, but as Dan approached adolescence his father became involved in several “cultish” Protestant sects. Around that time, Dan started to feel some confusion about his sexuality and began acting out. He first went into juvenile hall for car theft at age thirteen, and continued in and out of the penal system, on charges ranging from drug possession to armed robbery, for the subsequent thirty years. He is now in his early fifties. As he tells it, eight years ago he was at the “end of his rope” and finally made a commitment to God that would stick, but it was not the first time he was saved. Despite pressure from the Aryan Brotherhood to join them, during his times of incarceration Dan was generally pretty faithful.
From the mid-seventies through the mid-nineties he had periods of living as a “fully-functioning Christian,” interspersed with relapses into drug and alcohol abuse and returns to prison. His story was an emotional one, and he broke down in tears a few times as he told it. He is now married, living a devout Christian life in a middle-class suburb in Northern California where he has a graphic design business.

Fernando Vega – When he was only twelve and a half years old, Fernando shot a police officer. This was in 1972. Between that time and this, Francisco has not spent more than two consecutive years outside of a correctional facility. He is a 43 year old Latino man with a plump face and tired eyes. His convictions in adult court range from attempted murder to drug trafficking and have all carried sentences of five years or shorter. At the time of our interview he had been out of prison (CVP) for two months. He told me he didn’t think he’d get arrested again, but that he was scared he might. Most of what he knows about Christianity he learned in the “hole,” locked up alone with nothing but a Bible. There, he said, the Bible kept him sane. When he was in prison, he did not become immersed in the Christian community, but practiced his faith alone. He attended Catholic services in prison because that is what he was raised with and because he connected with the Catholic chaplain, but he no longer considers himself a Catholic. Rather, he calls himself a “believer of God.” Fernando is currently living with his mother and father, who are practicing Catholics. He attends church with them every Sunday, but is not connected with any faith-based programs or involved in the faith community in any ways other than weekly mass.
References


