

Essay

## The Resurgence of Religion in America's Prisons

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the growing prominence of “faith-based” programs in American corrections and the historical context of penal regime change during periods of economic crisis. The article traces areas of overlap and divergence in recent discussions of penal reform in the U.S. The article suggests a new American penitentiary movement is emerging, noting central tenets of faith-based programs have salience for both conservatives and liberals: on the one hand, faith-based programs are largely paid for by church congregations and volunteers, which appeals to conservatives’ desire to shrink government and get taxpayers out of the business of community building; on the other, faith-based programs demonstrate a recommitment to having at least some level of programming in prisons, which satisfies the left’s view that community building and social capital ultimately lower recidivism. The paper documents several prominent faith-based correctional programs while articulating an agenda for research.

**Keywords:** prisons; penitentiary; religion

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*The religious influence on prison reform and penal policy remained a powerful one throughout the nineteenth century, as the work of Ignatieff and others has shown. Evangelicals were in the vanguard of reforming movements both in Britain and in the USA, helping to ameliorate conditions of captivity and to aid prisoners upon their release, later*

*developing alternatives to imprisonment such as probation, which began as a form of missionary work funded by church-based temperance societies [1].*

## 1. Introduction

In surprising ways, the history of prison reform involves first a detailed study of economic and social relations. Historians of punishment emphasize changing economic modes of production and how these relate to dramatic shifts in prevailing strategies of punishment. Durkheim emphasized how the emerging “division of labor” in industrial capitalism weakened social solidarity to bring about a rise in individualistic punishments over those performed in the public square; Foucault highlighted the “birth of the prison” amid the rise of market-focused “technologies of the soul” in the penitentiary itself; Dario Melosi and Massimo Pavarini [2], in their book *The Prison and the Factory: Origins of the Penitentiary System*, identify the architecture of the penitentiary system not just as a point of confinement and observation, but also as the point of instruction for a monastic-like work ethic to be applied in congregate factories. Historians of punishment often focus on the impact of economic social relations regarding transformations in penal strategy and changing sensibilities about punishment [3].

The prison itself, of course, first expanded as a humane alternative to the harsh public square punishments of the 17th and 18th centuries when the guillotine—first reserved for reasons of “decency” to members of the aristocracy—was made “democratically” available to all capital defendants during the French Revolution [4]. As the scaffold came to be associated with riotous fighting and political rebellion—the prison followed soon after, allowing for more regulated sanctioning while avoiding the spectacle of harsh public square punishments.

In short, the birth of the prison corresponded to the rise of industrial capitalism, with changing economic and social relations rendering corporal punishment less effective for securing public order than more regimented punishments of the “soul”. As Jonathan Simon puts it: “The prison permits a far more graduated system of sanctions, the better to encourage full enforcement of the criminal laws protecting property. It operates to enforce discipline and self-control on those subjected to its rigors without the need or occasion for unruly publics to gather.” [5]. When speaking of the “birth of the prison” or “discovery” of the asylum or as we argue here, even the (re)invention of “faith-based prisons”, criminologists and historians of punishment should revisit the observation of Rusche and Kirchheimer: “Every system of production tends to discover punishments which correspond to its productive relationships.” [6]. As the current era of mass-incarceration breaks down under increasing criticism from both sides of the political aisle, it is important to examine the macro-level changes that might be driving the re-emergence of religion in American prisons.

## 2. The Unintended Consequences of Correctional Expansion

It is not surprising that penal institutions respond quickly and early to profound changes in political economy. As institutions that are largely bound to fail in their own terms at suppressing crime, and which are likely to come under particular stress and scrutiny during periods of social conflict, penal institutions are always about “reform”; either the existing ideals, still in need of proper implementation, or through proclaiming new ideals. “When something important changes in the political economy, throwing into question the practicality or relevance of existing assumptions about

social stability, the legitimacy of institutions of punishment is likely to be seen as in crisis and requiring dramatic changes” [5].

America’s massive correctional build up has taken a high toll not only on taxpayers in general, but especially on the plight of those residing within disadvantaged communities [7–13]. When one thinks of crime victims, children of prisoners, for example, do not typically come to mind. However, the many challenges facing children of an incarcerated parent make them one of the most disadvantaged groups in our society. Not surprisingly, children of prisoners go on to be overrepresented in the criminal justice system [14]. In addition to the estimated two million children of prisoners, add another roughly one million children of prisoners who may have a parent leaving prison each year. Over just the last five years, it is likely some seven million children have either had a parent in prison or recently released from prison. Further, these estimates do not consider the large number of children who have or have recently had a parent incarcerated in jail. [15].

When a parent is incarcerated, the lives of their children can be disrupted in many tragic ways. A change in the child’s caregivers or the addition of a new member to the household can be quite traumatic [16]. For children who reside with a parent who becomes incarcerated, this may result in foster care placement and the introduction of new family members as well as reliance on nonparent adults for care [17]. Repeated changes in family relationships are a common source of disruption in children’s lives. The potential instability and insecurities surrounding caregivers can be devastating for children [18]. Consider that children of prisoners are more likely to observe parental substance abuse, perform poorly in school, and experience poverty and disadvantage [19]. Moreover, research suggests that because of social stigma and isolation, families often deceive children about the whereabouts of incarcerated parents [20,21]. Taken together, these toxic factors can lead children of prisoners into early and frequent contact with the criminal justice system. In fact, children of prisoners are at-risk for alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency and crime, gang involvement, and subsequent incarceration [22–24]. For some children of prisoners, a fatalistic attitude can emerge whereby they believe there is little hope for living a full life, and even an expectation of following a similar path as their incarcerated parent [25,26].

We know that the cycle of imprisonment among large numbers of individuals is increasingly concentrated in poor, urban communities that already have enormous social and economic disadvantages [27,28]. Most prisoners are ill-prepared to navigate the many obstacles awaiting them after leaving prison including housing, employment, transportation, and trying to re-connect with families. To state the obvious, most ex-prisoners are not returning to positive and welcoming environments [29,30]. So challenging for ex-prisoners is this reentry process that many fall prey to substance abuse and other major health risks [30]. In fact, a study of all inmates released from prison in the state of Washington from July 1999 through December 2003 found the risk of death among former inmates to be 3.5 times higher than comparable residents during a 1.9 year follow-up period. Even more striking, during the first 2 weeks after release from prison, the risk of death among former inmates was 12.7 times that among other state residents. The leading causes of death among former inmates are drug overdose, cardiovascular disease, homicide, and suicide [30], *et al.*

### 3. Unlikely Allies in Prison Reform

While it may be premature to invoke Victor Hugo's axiom "no army can stop an idea whose time has come" regarding prison reform, even a cursory examination of recent policy statements from both liberal and conservative leaders suggest harsh "warehouse" sentencing and massive prison construction may be coming to an end. Prison reformers on the left tend to highlight the cost-effectiveness of community-based rehabilitation programs for reducing offender recidivism when compared to long-term incarceration. Reformers on the right emphasize a sea change in how conservatives view criminal justice spending. As conservative reform advocate Grover Norquist recently put it: "Spending more on education doesn't necessarily get you more education. That's also true about national defense. It turns out it's also true about criminal justice and fighting crime." [31].

Insofar as getting "tough on crime" has been a defining issue for political conservatives, it has also created large government bureaucracies in policing, courts and corrections amid a largely federally funded "war on drugs" [32–35]. While consensus on the left has been that harsh prison sentences would lead to "institutionalization" and high recidivism, a newer movement away from harsh sentencing on the right connotes a deeper philosophical aversion to justice spending equivalent to that of other public sectors—as sources of high taxes and "big government". For example, Dagan and Teles explore the roots of conservative efforts to scale back use of incarceration, suggesting failed prisons have become like failing schools—and correctional officer employee unions equivalent to teachers unions who resist attempts to measure their performance:

"Once you believe that prisons are like any other agency, then it becomes natural to suspect that wardens and prison guards, like other suppliers of government services, might submit to the temptations of monopoly, inflating costs and providing shoddy service. And, of course, conservatives have long made such arguments to justify their pet project of bidding out incarceration to for-profit businesses. But the prisons-as-big-government critique has acquired a new force that makes the privatization debate almost irrelevant. Far from shilling for corporate jailers, conservatives now want to shrink the market. For fiscal hawks, the point now is not to incarcerate more efficiently or profitably, but to incarcerate less." [31].

In sum, while the left's concern about mass incarceration has been focused on the racially disproportionate impact of drug sentences and deleterious effects of long prison sentences, prison reformers on the right stress concerns about cost and return on investment.

However, the emerging contours of agreement between left and right on prison reform need to be closely examined. Nuances in cross-party support for prison reform belie deeper shifts in economic and social relations that better contextualize the debate. For example, the energy behind prison reform is anchored by agreement that harsh warehouse sentencing policies have failed taxpayers, but this consensus is not driven by wholesale agreement about what should come next. Heather Rice-Minus, a lawyer with the Justice Fellowship, the policy branch of Prison Fellowship, founded by the late Chuck Colson, sees traditional values at work. "We may use different language, but whether it's, quote, social or racial justice on the left, or quote, redemption and government accountability on the right, we're uniting on reform based on different but complementary values." [31].

Insofar as crime fighting has long been a core issue for conservatives, it has also carried high costs for taxpayers in prison construction, the hiring of more police officers, and maintaining custody and control of skyrocketing numbers of inmates [33,34]. While the vast majority of resources spent in the war on crime, of course, has gone to public and governmental agencies, a core impetus of faith-based programs is to re-direct government spending away from public agencies and funnel these toward private organizations outside of government. In the aftermath of the left's social welfare strategy for managing poverty and the right's subsequent zero tolerance strategy for managing crime, taxpayers arguably find themselves at the conclusion of two failed eras of modern social control, both of which required "big government" spending, but neither of which produced the longer-term transformations in social relations promised at the beginning.

Meanwhile, the needs of released prisoners returning to communities are in fact greater than ever before. According to Urban Institute: "In comparison to a decade ago, men and women leaving prison are less prepared for reintegration, less connected to community-based social structures, and more likely to have health or substance abuse issues." [36]. Hyper-incarceration weakened inner-city neighborhoods all the more, making them less able to successfully reintegrate ex-offenders than before. This is not to suggest that full-scale agreement between liberals and conservatives has been achieved on the topic of faith-based prison programs. While many liberals fear faith-based prisons violate separation of church and state, especially for their captive audiences, many conservative evangelicals also emphasize the notion that to be truly "faith-based", religious organizations should disassociate themselves entirely from government [37].

In sum, much recent criminological scholarship examines the shift toward high incarceration over the past 35 years, especially as it corresponds to a dismantling of the welfare state and rise of a "big government security state" [34,35]. Ultimately, however, both arguably failed. First, social welfare programs trapped impoverished citizens in isolated "housing projects" removed from transportation and employment while providing fiscal incentives for childbirth that weakened family cohesion. Next, the subsequent incarceration boom further depleted urban centers of social capital, housed men inside prisons until they became institutionalized, while providing almost no aftercare upon release. By the mid-1990s, recidivism skyrocketed in a perfect storm of expanded blight and social disorganization, with the greatest increase in recidivism being in the very policy area that was the priority of the crackdown: drug crime [38,39]. To paraphrase the work of criminologist Loic Wacquant and others, from the vantage point of 2014, both the *war on poverty* and the *war on drugs* were, in fact, failed wars on the same people, designed not so much to transform the poor as to contain them, not so much to address "broken windows" as to simply displace those visibly breaking them [39,40].

#### **4. A Just Measure of Faith: The New American Penitentiary Movement**

In this paper, we argue a new American penitentiary movement is taking place and that a central tenet of faith-based programs helps explain its salience for both conservatives and liberals: on the one hand, faith-based programs are largely paid for by church congregations and volunteers, which appeals to conservatives' desire to shrink government and get taxpayers out of the business of community building; on the other hand, faith-based programs also demonstrate a recommitment to having at least

some level of programming in prisons, which satisfies the left's view that community building and social capital ultimately lower recidivism.

By suggesting that program activities delivered by faith-based groups produce better results than similar programs run by the government, proponents of faith-based programs rely on claims of superior performance based on morality and caring—as well as the fact that many times these services are delivered by volunteers, at no cost to taxpayers. The argument frequently made on behalf of faith-based programs is twofold: first, that faith-based programs provide services at lower cost, but also that, second, faith-based programs provide services that government cannot provide at all—through the loving-kindness of volunteers motivated by agape and not a government contract or paycheck. The claim often made on behalf of faith-based programs is not only that they are cheaper, but that they are better [41]. The Preamble to Florida's enabling legislation authorizing the state's first "faith-based prison" demonstrates both the prioritization of private spirituality and fiscal conservatism in the faith-based prisons movement:

Whereas state government should not and cannot bear the sole burden of treating and helping those suffering from addictions and self-injurious behaviors, and, Whereas, faith-based organizations are "armies of compassion" devoted to changing individuals' hearts and lives and can offer cost-effective substance abuse treatment through the use of volunteers and other cost saving measures, and Whereas research has proven that "one-on-one" private and faith-based programming is often more effective than government programs in shaping and reclaiming lives because they are free to assert the essential connection between responsibility and human dignity; their approach is personal, not bureaucratic; their service is not primarily a function of professional background, but of individual commitment; and they inject an element of moral challenge and spiritual renewal that government cannot duplicate and Whereas, in an effort to transform lives and break the personally destructive and expensive recidivism cycle, Florida should increase the number of chaplains who strengthen volunteer participation and expand the pilot [faith-based] dormitory program that includes a voluntary faith component that supports inmates as they reenter communities. Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida.

—Preamble, 2001 Florida Criminal Rehabilitation Act 2001 Fl. ALS 110; 2001 Fla. Laws ch. 110;  
2001 Fla. SB 912

Thus, when placing the emergence of a faith-based prisons movement into context, it becomes clear that calls for faith-based prison reform emerged at a time of broader shifts in economic and social relations, reflective of longer-standing historical patterns. As Beckett and Sasson point out regarding the "big government" of criminal justice programming, however: "Reduced welfare expenditures are not necessarily indicative of a shift toward reduced government intervention in social life, but rather a shift toward a more exclusionary and punitive approach to the regulation of social marginality." [33]. Coming out of the 1970s, with urban ghettos isolated and dysfunctional, featuring failing schools, entropy in family, and persistent high unemployment, poor black neighborhoods produced record numbers of prisoners. Middle class voters of the same period, removed from the travails of urban decline, endorsed "toughness on crime" and a "culture of control" [42]. Social inequality, civil rights

and integrationist agendas faded from prominence while scaling back the welfare state even by left leaning politicians like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair translated into high incarceration.

Perhaps the most fundamental “cultural” divide in contemporary U.S. politics involves the question of personal responsibility *versus* that of opportunity, agency *versus* structure. The social construction of “deserving” *versus* the “undeserving” poor—changed over time, from “deserving poor” being a descriptor of rural white poverty during the Great Depression, to the moniker “undeserving poor” aimed at African-American urban poverty in the 1960s [33]. As Melossi and Pavarini point out, however, the distinction between “good poor” and “bad poor” dates back to the emergence of industrial capitalism itself, with merit being associated with one’s capacity and willingness for labor and prisons becoming a place “for teaching the discipline of production” [2]. In short, it is a time of great transition in American criminal justice policy—prompting both a sense of hope and fear among criminologists: “I think there is a general sense right now that we have built a beast that has to be un-built, and people are trying to figure out how we do it...For criminologists who have been doing this for over 35 years, it is an exciting time, because the conversation has changed.” [43].

Indeed, a central platform of the “compassionate conservative” movement on the right may now be coalescing with prison reform advocates on the left, in that both personal responsibility and providing opportunity through forgiveness is increasingly seen as both prudent and the right thing to do. As one of the nation’s leading conservative proponents of prison reform, Texas Senator John Cornyn recently put it: “I’ve long despaired over the fact that we sort of gave up on people, or we have historically given up on people. Rehabilitation, alternative approaches, or at least giving people a second chance is the right thing to do, the humane thing to do, and it’s a whole lot more cost-effective.” [31].

## 5. Tracking the Scope and Evolution of Faith-Based Programs in American Prisons

The absence of a comprehensive list or index of all faith-based programs operating in American prisons belies the fact that these programs exist in all prisons and correctional facilities in the United States. Religious programs for inmates are not only among the oldest but also among the most common forms of rehabilitative programs found in correctional facilities today [44,45]. This high prevalence of use is confirmed by the U.S. Department of Justice, which reports representative data on America’s prison population. After admission to prison, 69% of inmates report having working assignments, 45% report participating in some form of academic education, and 31% report attending vocational training.<sup>1</sup> Among all other types of personal enhancement programs offered in prison, religious activities attracted the most participation: 32% of the sampled inmates reported involvement in religious activities such as Bible studies and church services, 20% reported taking part in self-improvement programs, and 17% reported that they had been involved in counseling. This national survey verifies what many correctional practitioners and volunteers have observed for years; namely, that many inmates attend and participate in religious programs.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bureau of Justice Statistics conducted this study in the summer of 1991, conducting face-to-face interviews with 13,986 inmates from 277 correctional facilities in 14 states. The sampling design used a stratified two-stage selection process whereby the prisoners interviewed were selected from more than 711,000 adults held in state correctional facilities throughout the United States. Similar surveys were conducted in 1974, 1979, and 1986.

However, what is new is the way in which the reach and nature of religious programs have changed in prisons over the last several decades. For many, quite understandably, the term “prison ministry” is synonymous with prison evangelism. Many churches have a prison ministry as part of a congregation’s overall outreach strategy. However, even more common than church sponsored prison ministries are “mom and pop” jail/prison ministries. These individual-led ministries are rarely organized, and often operate in complete isolation from other congregation-based outreach efforts to prisoners. Regular observers of American prisons—rural or urban, large or small, minimum or maximum security—will find that these mom and pop prison ministries tend to be small and insular and are primarily aimed at preaching and evangelism.

Perhaps, the earliest and largest organized effort toward prison evangelism can be traced to 1969 and the Bill Glass Evangelistic Association. Now known as Champions for Life (CFL), this prison ministry was founded by former National Football League football player Bill Glass, and purports to be the world’s largest evangelistic prison ministry [44]. CFL’s mission statement is to “assist the Church by equipping and igniting Christians to share their faith in Jesus Christ with the ‘least of these’.” Given this history, it is not surprising that prison ministries are viewed as simply evangelizing prisoners. Consequently, one might suspect that people driven to preach to prisoners would not really be very compassionate or have a more holistic vision for prisoner rehabilitation that prioritizes a host of non-spiritual or secular concerns related to prisoner needs like education, vocational training, life skills, and mentoring. Read the promotional material of some of these prison ministries and one will find plenty of assertions that would seem to reinforce this stereotype.

The reality is that contemporary prison ministry and faith-based prison programs are not simply evangelistic—far from it. For several decades, prison ministries have done far more than simply preach to prisoners. Instead of just going into correctional facilities to participate in an evangelistic service or lead a Bible study, faith-motivated volunteers as well as faith-based organizations have increasingly developed and implemented much more pervasive and comprehensive programs for prisoners, ex-prisoners, and even the families of those incarcerated.

Consider the aforementioned Champions for Life, known as the world’s largest evangelistic prison ministry, has developed multiple programs that target other at-risk populations, and do so without an evangelistic focus. CFL and its various ministries are dedicated to promoting virtuous and prosocial behavior to children in public schools, especially inner-city schools, as well as providing long-term mentoring relationships to adjudicated youth coming out of the juvenile court system [44]. Thus, the organization known as the world’s largest evangelistic prison ministry is actively supporting at-risk youth in non-proselytizing ways that seek to steer at-risk youth away from a life of crime.

Kairos Prison Ministry International, one of the largest prison ministries in the world, seeks to address the spiritual needs of incarcerated men and women, and their families, as well as those who work in the prison environment. According to the Kairos mission statement, “the people of Kairos are called by God to share the love of Christ with those impacted by incarceration”. Drawing upon believers from a variety of Christian traditions, Kairos trains volunteers to work within one of three Kairos programs: Kairos Inside, Kairos Outside, and Kairos Torch [45].

Kairos Inside utilizes trained volunteer teams of men and women from communities in close proximity to an institution to present an introductory 3-day weekend, deemed “a short course on Christianity”. This effort is mobilized in cooperation with the prison chaplain, and an organized follow-up is part of

the weekend program. The Kairos Inside program currently operates in 350 prisons in 31 states in the U.S. and eight additional countries. More than 170,000 incarcerated men and women have been introduced to Kairos, since its inception and the current number of volunteers exceeds 20,000 per year [45].

Kairos Outside is a special weekend retreat designed to support the female loved ones of men and women who are incarcerated. It is a safe environment for women to interact with other women in similar situations. Women are encouraged to form small groups that can support them in dealing with the many challenges facing the families of the incarcerated. The Kairos Outside program operates in 19 states, Canada, England, Australia and South Africa, and is active in 35 locations. Kairos Torch is a ministry that encourages young men and women who have experiences in the criminal justice system to participate in mentoring relationships. Kairos volunteers commit to a weekly mentoring process with these youthful offenders for six months following the initial weekend retreat. Currently, the Kairos Torch program is operational in 10 locations.

In sum, Kairos Prison Ministry utilizes an army of trained volunteers to work with and mentor male and female prisoners. Moreover, recognizing that correctional environments are stressful, Kairos volunteers also seek to encourage those correctional employees working within correctional environments. Though sharing the Christian faith is still central, Kairos volunteers provide all manner of assistance to prisoners whether through education, life skills, and ongoing mentoring. Additionally, Kairos is actively mentoring youthful offenders in an effort to prevent these same youth from ending up in the adult correctional system.

Launched in London, England in the late 1970s, the Alpha Course presents the basic principles of the Christian faith to new Christians. Over the last two decades, the course has expanded internationally and Alpha USA has also launched Alpha for Prisons which presently operates in 145 prisons within the United States. More recently, Alpha USA through collaborative efforts with other faith-based and community organizations is now offering prisoner re-entry services to the criminal justice system.

Founded in 2000, Horizon Prison Ministry works to restore prisoners and those formerly incarcerated to healthy purposeful living through mentoring, education, skill training, and spiritual growth. Horizon attempts to bring the larger community into the process of restoring offenders back to society. The Horizon program extends over a 12-month period. Inmates who volunteer to participate in Horizon are placed within a modified housing unit. The men come together as a community in a living and learning environment. Horizon has a focus on transition preparation and men receive mentoring and guidance from Horizon volunteers and a group of resident encouragers. Preliminary evaluation research of Horizon program shows promising results [46–50].

The Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP) is a Houston-based nonprofit organization that connects executives, MBA students, and leaders with convicted felons [48]. PEP was founded on the proposition that if inmates who were committed to their own transformation were equipped to start and run legitimate companies, they could succeed in business following release from prison. PEP sponsors entrepreneurship boot camps and re-entry programs for inmates. It started with a “behind bars” business plan competition that drew upon the entrepreneurial acumen of inmates. The initial experiment proved so successful that the Prison Entrepreneurship Program was established in 2004. The mission of PEP is to stimulate positive life transformation for business executives and inmates, uniting them through entrepreneurial passion, education and mentoring. Since the inception of PEP,

over 700 inmates have graduated from the program. PEP graduates, on average, pay approximately \$7000 annually in taxes following release from prison. PEP is growing quickly and now recruits prisoners from more than 60 prisons throughout the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). PEP is arguably one of the most innovative and promising correctional programs in the entire country.

Data provided to the authors by Prison Fellowship, America's largest non-profit organization offering religious programming in prisons, shows their systematic residential programs exist in nearly 30% of all U.S. prisons, while their ad hoc programs are offered in an astonishing 86% of all America's 1236 prisons. At this point, more than half the states have some form of residential faith-based programs operating in their prison systems, and, by Constitutional fiat, all U.S. prisons must allow for religious worship and free-exercise of faith. Nationwide, literally hundreds of thousands of inmates participate in Prison Fellowship (PF) programs each year. Angel Tree, a program that unites offenders with their children while they are incarcerated, particularly around the holidays, currently exists in 81% of American state prisons.

PF offers prisoners a variety of in-prison programs. Through one-to-three-day seminars and weekly Bible studies, inmates are taught to set goals that prepare them for release. Weekly Bible studies usually last an hour, and one-to-three day seminars might be offered several times a year at a particular prison. The level of prisoner exposure to such religious programs is probably no more than 50 h of Bible study and several days of intensive seminars annually—a relatively modest correctional intervention. Even so, preliminary empirical evidence indicates regular participation in volunteer-led Bible studies is associated with reductions in recidivism. For example, Johnson, Larson, and Pitts (1997) [50] found that prisoners from four different New York prisons who attended 10 or more Bible studies during a one-year period prior to release were significantly less likely to be arrested during a one-year post-release follow-up study. In a more recent study, tracking these same prisoners for an additional seven years, it was found that regular participation in volunteer-led Bible studies remains significantly linked to lower rates of recidivism for two years and even three years post-release [50].

In the 1990s, PF tried to locate a prison partner that would allow them to launch a new initiative that would replace occasional volunteer efforts with a completely faith-based approach to prison programs. The ultimate goal would be to reform prisoners as well the prison itself. The late Charles Colson, founder of PF, unsuccessfully pitched this idea to a number of governors, before finding in 1996 an enthusiastic partner in then-Texas governor George W. Bush [51]. The collaboration between the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) and PF represented a first for Texas, if not the country. According to PF, the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) was different from traditional prison ministries in that it promotes adult basic education, vocational training, life skills, mentoring, and aftercare, while linking each of these components in a setting permeated by faith. IFI promotional material initially described the program as a “revolutionary, Christ-centered, Bible-based prison program supporting prison inmates through their spiritual and moral transformation beginning while incarcerated and continuing after release”. Not surprisingly, this description fed the mistaken notion that religious programs like IFI were at odds with a treatment model. In reality, however, IFI established an approach that viewed religion and treatment as complementary [52].

IFI was officially launched in April of 1997, at the Carol Vance Unit, a 378-bed prison in Richmond, Texas. IFI is responsible for inmate programs and TDCJ is responsible for security and custody. Together, PF and the TDCJ formed a unique private–public partnership that would test the proposition

that this sacred–secular collaboration could achieve the civic purpose of reducing recidivism and thereby increase public safety.

Anchored in biblical teaching, life-skills education, and group accountability, IFI established a three-phase program involving prisoners in 16–24 months of in-prison biblical programs and 6–12 months of aftercare while on parole. Phase I of IFI lasts approximately 12 months and focuses on rebuilding the inmate’s spiritual and moral foundation as well as providing educational and survival skills. A heavy emphasis is placed on:

- biblical education, GED, tutoring, substance abuse prevention, and life skills
- work (jobs are similar to those of other prisoners in the general population)
- support groups designed to increase one’s personal faith
- support groups for enriching relations with family members and crime victims
- mentoring
- peer groups (Community Bible Study)

Phase II of the IFI program lasts 6–12 months and seeks to continue the educational, work, and support group aspect of the program. The main difference in Phase II is that IFI participants are allowed to perform community service work during the day at off-site locations, such as Habitat for Humanity. IFI members in Phase II continue with Christian-based education, Bible study courses, mentoring, and support groups, but with a special emphasis on leadership issues.

Phase III of IFI is the aftercare component of the faith-based program and lasts for an additional 6–12 months. The mission of the aftercare program is to assist participants in their reentry into society by helping with housing and employment referrals, facilitating the mentoring relationship, and making connections between the offender and local church communities that will provide a nurturing environment to continue the former prisoner’s spiritual growth. Aftercare workers recruit new churches and volunteers to assist in the mentoring of IFI participants, and to help with other critical reentry needs such as housing, transportation, and employment.

Johnson and Larson utilized a quasi-experimental research design, and found that IFI program graduates had significantly lower rates of rearrest than a matched group of inmates (17.3% vs. 35%), and had significantly lower rates of reincarceration than the matched group (8% vs. 20.3%) [52]. The fact that IFI graduates are significantly less likely to be either rearrested or reincarcerated during the two-year period following release from prison represents initial evidence that program completion of this faith-based initiative is associated with lower rates of recidivism of former prisoners.

Modeled on Prison Fellowship’s InnerChange Freedom Initiative in Texas, the Minnesota Department of Correction (DOC) established in 2002 the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (InnerChange), a faith-based prisoner reentry program located at the Minnesota Correctional Facility (MCF)-Lino Lakes on the edge of the Twin Cities. MCF-Lino Lakes is a medium security facility. InnerChange is privately funded, and the program depends heavily on volunteers from local churches and religious organizations for the delivery of many of the services provided. InnerChange programs cover areas related to substance abuse education, victim impact awareness, life skills development, cognitive skill development, educational attainment, community reentry, religious instruction, and moral development.

The Minnesota DOC completed an outcome evaluation of the InnerChange program [53]. The evaluation assessed the impact of InnerChange on recidivism among 732 offenders released from

Minnesota prisons between 2003 and 2009. The average follow-up period for the 732 offenders was a little more than three years. To evaluate the effectiveness of the InnerChange program for male inmates at MCF-Lino Lakes, the DOC examined recidivism outcomes among 732 offenders released from prison between 2003 and 2009. InnerChange participants had lower recidivism rates than the offenders in the comparison group. For example, 42% of the InnerChange participants had been rearrested for a new offense by the end of December 2011 compared with 51% of the comparison group offenders. The results also show that 25% of the InnerChange participants were reconvicted for a new offense compared to 34% in the comparison group. In addition, 9% of the InnerChange participants were reincarcerated for a new criminal offense compared to 13% of the comparison group offenders. The results from the multivariate statistical analyses, which controlled for time at risk and other rival causal factors, revealed that participating in InnerChange significantly lowered the risk of recidivism by 26% for rearrest, 35% for reconviction, and 40% for new offenses leading to reincarceration.

According to Duwe and King, there are likely several reasons why InnerChange reduces recidivism [53]. Though traditional Christian beliefs and doctrine promote living a prosocial and crime-free life, InnerChange also attempted to lessen the recidivism risk of those who participate by focusing on issues such as education, criminal thinking, and chemical dependency. Further, InnerChange participants receive a continuum of care that connects the delivery of programs in the institution to those found in the community. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, InnerChange expands offender social support networks by connecting participants to mentors and linking them with faith communities after their release from prison. The findings suggest that faith-based correctional programs can work if they incorporate elements of other correctional programs that are known to be effective. Additionally, a cost-benefit study by Duwe and Johnson finds that the Minnesota InnerChange program saves taxpayers approximately \$8300 per participant [54].

Helping prisoners to rewrite their life narrative can be a powerful and redemptive experience, giving ex-prisoners the hope and purpose needed to start a new and positive life, while at the same time helping them to come to grips with the anti-social life they have left behind [55,56]. Preliminary evidence indicates that faith-based pre-release/reentry prison programs can be effective in reducing recidivism [57]. However, most faith-based programs do not last very long and one can readily argue that to have the biggest possible salutary effect, prisoners need a more substantial or sustained faith-based intervention to be effective. Moreover, the most serious offenders tend to have longer prison sentences and are typically ineligible for consideration when it comes to participation in programs.

However, two experimental programs are now ready to test the proposition that a four-year prison seminary can be effective with even the hardest of those criminals serving very long sentences—even life sentences—within our nation's maximum security prisons. The Darrington Unit (Rosharon, TX, USA) resembles most other maximum security prisons around the country, except for the fact that it now offers a four-year seminary within the prison. On 29 August 2011, 39 prisoners were formally installed as the first class of seminarians studying to become ministers under a new program that operates within this maximum security prison. Referred to as the Darrington Seminary, it is an extension of the Ft. Worth-based Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The nondenominational program is carefully modeled after a similar initiative at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, often referred to as Angola. Initiated by warden Burl Cain, the Angola Bible College (which is an extension of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary) has received considerable attention from religious media

outlets since its inception in 1995. The unique aspect of these two seminaries is that they focus on enrolling “lifers” as well as those with extremely long prison sentences, so that the men, once graduated, will have many years to spend in sharing their faith and their moral convictions with others inside the prison [58].

Angola has a notorious and well-documented history as one of the most violent prisons in America. However, what an increasing number of observers have reported in recent years is a far less violent Angola. Many have suggested that Angola has undergone a total change in the prison culture during the last 20 years. Moreover, some credit this change to the fact that the Angola seminary graduates have remained inside the prison. Using this particular “lifer-student” approach, correctional leaders at Angola and Darrington are convinced they have the potential to not only rehabilitate prisoners, but to transform the prison environment itself.

Again, the difference in Angola and Darrington, where faith-based programs are concerned, is that these two seminaries will accept only those inmates with extremely long sentences, so the inmates can be returned to service inside the prison system, and therefore exert for many years an influence for moral change and spiritual renewal among the rest of the inmates. The most critical aspect of these two seminaries is their commitment to send their graduates out as “Field Ministers” to other prisons in their respective states. Angola has been sending out their graduates as “missionaries” for a number of years, and the Darrington Seminary now has approval from the highest levels of the TDCJ to follow this same approach [57].

The idea of placing a seminary within a maximum security prison is unprecedented within the field of corrections. However, the idea of placing seminaries in other prisons is already gaining traction amongst correctional leaders and key decision-makers. In fact, the Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) and Prison Fellowship have launched in the last several years more than 20 seminaries within California’s prison system as well as that many in prisons outside of California [58]. Indeed, serious discussions are now taking place between TUMI/PF and officials from a host of states regarding the possibility of bringing these privately funded prison seminary programs to prisons across the country. If these discussions take root, we may well be observing a major shift within the American prison system within the next few years.

Since faith-based programs tend to be privately funded and largely staffed by volunteers, they come at little or no cost to taxpayers. In a time of shrinking budgets and program cutbacks, correctional administrators are increasingly open to the idea of volunteer led faith-based programs and even seminaries, especially if the evidence indicates that they can be effective in reducing recidivism.

## **6. The Need for More Research on Faith-Based Prison Programs**

Despite the widespread presence of faith-based programs in American prisons, research on faith-based programs remains limited [59]. The field is in its infancy, beset by methodological and implementation challenges as well as the broad diversity in scope and character of faith-based programs operating in American corrections. As the Urban Institute recently stated: “Basic but critical questions about the nature of faith-based programs and how they may improve offender outcomes, including recidivism and other reentry outcomes, remain largely unanswered” [36]. Unfortunately, little research in the way

of a deep-level examination of the specific elements of religiosity as they relate to desistance appears in the social science literature [60,61].

In short, despite the fact that religious faith has long been a cultural proxy for criminal rehabilitation, social science research on the *specific connections* between religiosity and *criminal desistance* has been lacking. Social scientists have been reluctant to attempt to measure the impact of “faith” in correctional programs—for some very good reasons. First, federal agencies and private foundations have rarely funded or prioritized research on faith-based programs within the field of corrections. This oversight has been a deterrent to scholars looking to conduct research in this overlooked area. Second, in the United States, because Constitutional strictures surrounding the 1st Amendment require voluntariness and a complete lack of coercion when governing participation in custodial “faith-based” programs, the obvious problem of *selection bias* complicates all efforts to compare performance of volunteers for faith-based programs with that of those who did not. In other words, for comparison purposes, we are not able to randomly assign individuals into experimental (e.g., faith-based program) or control groups (those receiving no intervention).

Regarding selection bias, inmates who volunteer for faith-based programs may be already qualitatively different from the general population of inmates—possibly being easier to deal with, more habitable in general, and more amenable to behavioral change. Critics of faith-based programs suggest the assets of faith-based programs—offered by volunteers at almost no cost to correctional systems in the U.S.—often provide resources widely unavailable to the general population of inmates. In other words, there may be “false incentives” to proclaiming one’s faith in the context of prison that mask true behavior change or spiritual growth. More seriously, any positive effects of religious programs may well be the byproducts of qualitatively “easier” inmates self-selecting into the program while being offered a richer menu of human contact and services. As a result, much of the research on faith-based programs is still qualitative and even sometimes anecdotal [62–68].

Selection bias may also run in the opposite direction. Namely, inmates with less than positive motivations may be quick to sign up for faith-based programs. In fact, this is exactly what Byron Johnson discovered in the evaluation of the Texas InnerChange Freedom Initiative, a faith-based prison in Texas [53]. In-depth interviews with inmates participating in the faith-based program revealed that many signed up for the program to get close to home (*i.e.*, Houston), not because they were religious or wanted to participate in a faith-based program. Likewise, interviews with chaplains and correctional staff at the same prison indicated a general distrust of inmates signing up for the faith-based program. Stated differently, correctional staff uniformly indicated that many of the inmates signing-up for the program were “cons” hoping to impress the parole board and earn an early parole for having participated in a religious program. In other words, the faith-based program would attract inmates that were anything but devoutly religious looking. Such inmates would look for any angle to exploit that presents them in a better light before prison authorities and the parole board.

In order to address this gap in research, a number of studies utilizing exploratory “unstructured life-history narratives” have been produced and that help identify and investigate the subjective experiences of desisters, by way of “cognitive shifts”, “identity changes”, and attempts at “making good” described by successful ex-offenders [61–68]. As demonstrated in this previous research, religiously-anchored “redemption narratives” provide desisters with an important spiritual “toolkit” necessary for coping with what criminologist John Braithwaite calls “shame management” [69].

Offenders often characterize the resources provided by religiosity as often *more accessible* and *comprehensive* than those available through the justice system. Indeed, religiously-motivated desisters often describe themselves as empowered or “fired up” to meet the challenges associated with constructing pro-social identities after release [61–68].

For the reasons mentioned, much of the research on faith-based programs that does exist relies on qualitative narrative accounts. Religious spirituality has, in fact, been found to be a highly salient resource for many successful ex-offenders, especially under conditions of low emotional support and weak informal social control [61,62,70–73]. Phenomenological analyses of the desistance process reveal that religion and spirituality frequently help offenders construct stories of change that become vital to an altered sense of self. More importantly, religiosity seems to help desisters undertake preliminary agentic moves that, while often not outwardly visible to family members or justice officials, are the beginnings of an evolving self-narrative that is both pro-social and provides a redemptive path [61,66].

Specifically, life-history narratives highlight agentic moves that draw upon stories of change emphasizing the ways religious practice and spirituality provide emotional, cognitive and linguistic resources employed by desisters in their daily lives. As Giordano *et al.* put it:

“Thus, in addition to its relative accessibility, religion seems to have potential as a mechanism for desistance because many core concerns within religious communities and the Bible relate directly to offenders’ problem areas. Even more importantly, religious teachings can provide a clear blueprint for how to proceed as a changed individual.” [68], *et al.*

## 7. Conclusions

Rebuilding the lives of ex-offenders has proven exceedingly difficult. With national data showing a near 70% recidivism rate within three years after release from prison (by re-arrest) and a greater than 50% re-incarceration rate within five, America’s correctional system has proven anything but the curative answer to the crime problem. Nearly 20 years of “prisoner reentry” research, moreover, has shown disappointing results—and in the comparatively few cases where desistance actually does take hold, desisters report succeeding *despite the system* rather than because of it [74]. For those few who do succeed after release from prison, the aphorism “you rehabilitate yourself” is what successful desisters report back [68]. Indeed, the high failure rate and sheer fiscal impact of American corrections draws resources away from related areas of concern like education and tuition-free childcare that might lesson crime. Despite the longstanding prominence of religion as a supposed source of criminal desistance, however, systematic research on specific religious programs for offenders is surprisingly lacking. While most research on religious programming for American prisoners involves Christianity, numerous documentations of non-Christian religious practice as supportive of offender desistance also exist in the literature. Two excellent recent pieces explore the growing prevalence of Eastern religious practice among prisoners [75,76].

While crime is often disproportionately concentrated in economically impoverished neighborhoods, religiosity may provide a reflexive framework empowering to ex-offenders. Successful desisters frequently report that religiosity provides a *spiritual fortitude* useful for a path for longer-term desistance even in

the context of structural inequality [61–65]. Faith-based programs in American corrections are growing in prominence and are likely here to stay.

### Author Contributions

The authors jointly conceptualized, authored and produced this manuscript.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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