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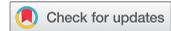
Images of God, Religious Involvement, and Prison Misconduct among Inmates

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ABSTRACT

The authors examine an offender's images of God – beliefs concerning God's forgiveness, engagement, and judgment – in relation to prison misconduct. They test whether these beliefs are related inversely to misconduct and, if so, whether the relationships are mediated by an inmate's religious involvement. The authors apply latent-variable structural equation modeling to analyze data from a survey of inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Controlling for socio-demographic and criminal backgrounds, they find an inmate's belief in God's engagement and forgiveness to be inversely associated with disciplinary convictions, though belief in God's judgment is not related to misconduct. The authors also find the relationship between an inmate's image of a forgiving God and misconduct to be mediated by the inmate's conversion narrative.

Introduction

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses tend to confirm an inverse relationship between an individual's religiousness or religiosity and crime (e.g., Baier & Wright, 2001; Johnson & Jang, 2010). Religiosity's conceptualization in criminological research over the past several decades, however, has not been as comprehensive in scope as early studies. Specifically, religious belief, which is a fundamental aspect of religiosity (Durkheim, 1912/1981), has not often been incorporated into the contemporary explanation of crime that focuses mostly on religious behavior, feeling, or belonging with an exception of research on attitudes toward criminal punishment (e.g., Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006).

To address the gap in research, we explore a concept of religious belief that has been understudied in criminology, image of God. Specifically, we examine beliefs among individuals in prison about God's forgiveness and two aspects of God's character proposed to be most relevant to the individual's attitudes and behaviors (Froese & Bader, 2007). These two aspects of God's character are the extent to which God judges and engages with the world. The images of forgiving, judgmental, and engaged God are likely to motivate a prison inmate not only to start to change his or her behavior, avoiding misconduct, but also to keep at it. Thus, we hypothesize the images of God to be inversely associated with prison

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misconduct. It is also hypothesized that the inverse relationships are attributable in part to an inmate's religious involvement in terms of religious practice, feeling, and conversion.

Data to test the hypotheses were drawn from an anonymous survey of 2,249 inmates at America's largest maximum-security prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary (a.k.a. Angola). The survey included items asking inmates not only about their images of God and disciplinary convictions but also other aspects of religiosity beyond religious belief—that is, religious practice (e.g., service attendance), feeling (e.g., religious salience), and belonging (i.e., religious affiliation)—and sociodemographic characteristics for which we needed to control to test our hypotheses. We applied latent-variable structural equation modeling to analyze the data. This article begins with a summary of criminological research on religion as a context for the present study, followed by a review of literatures on religion and criminal punishment, images of God, and prison misconduct before proposing our hypotheses. We then describe our data and measures, present results, and discuss practical as well as theoretical implications of our findings.

Criminological research on religion

Criminologists tend to give Hirschi and Stark (1969) credit for a subsequent boost in studies on religiosity and crime (Baier & Wright, 2001; Evans, Cullen, Dunaway, & Burton, 1995; Johnson & Jang, 2010), and many of the studies were triggered by their reporting of a nonsignificant relationship between "hellfire" belief and delinquency. Researchers have attributed the null finding to their study of nonascetic deviance (i.e., nondrug delinquency) and analysis of data collected in a less religious region (i.e., the West) (e.g., Burkett & White, 1974; Higgins & Albrecht, 1977). It might also have been due in part to Hirschi and Stark's (1969) limited operationalization of "belief in the existence of supernatural sanctions," for which they used "two items: 'There is a life beyond death,' and, 'The devil actually exists'" (p. 208). That is, the items had limited face validity given what they were supposed to measure: "the belief that one may be *punished in the world to come for violations in the here and now*" (p. 205, emphasis added).

Although their measure of religiosity was limited, Hirschi and Stark (1969) focus on religious belief was on target given that a personal belief in God—not only the existence but also nature of the deity (e.g., God of wrath vs. God of love)—is a key element in religiosity (Durkheim, 1912/1981; James, 1902/2007; Rohrbaugh & Jessor, 1975). In fact, studies conducted before Hirschi and Stark (1969) often employed a measure of religious belief (e.g., Middleton & Putney, 1962; see Knudten & Knudten, 1971 for a review of research prior to 1970). To the contrary, criminological research on religion conducted over the past several decades tended to use measures of religious belief less often.

For example, according to Johnson and Jang's (2010) systematic review, less than 10% of 259 studies (18 studies, 6.9%) published between 1970 and 2010 employed some measure of religious belief (e.g., Brown, Parks, Zimmerman, & Phillips, 2001; Chadwick & Top, 1993; Christo & Franey, 1995; Elifson, Peterson, & Hadaway, 1983; Ritt-Olson et al., 2004; Rohrbaugh & Jessor, 1975; Ross, 1994; Vener, Zaenglein, & Stewart, 1977). On the other hand, a much larger percentage of those studies measured religiosity in terms of behavior (i.e., service attendance and private practice), feeling (religious salience), and belonging (e.g., church membership and denomination): 59.8%, 42.9%, and 27.4%, respectively.

Unlike research on the influence of religion on crime, however, studies examining whether religion affects attitudes toward criminal punishment and rehabilitation have consistently used measures of religious belief, including image of God.

Criminological research on image of God

Although initial studies on criminal punishment focused on how Christian fundamentalist beliefs (e.g., biblical literalism) contribute to punitive ideology (e.g., Britt, 1998; Grasmick, Cochran, Bursik, & Kimpel, 1993; Young, 1992), later research examined compassionate as well as retributive aspects of religious beliefs in relation to attitudes toward punishment and rehabilitation. For example, Applegate et al. (2000) found (1) religious belief in forgiveness to be negatively associated with support for punishment but positively with that for rehabilitation and (2) a belief in a punitive God to be positively associated with support for punishment, though not for rehabilitation. Bader, Desmond, Mencken, and Johnson (2010) also found that beliefs in an angry and judgmental God were consistent predictors of punitive attitudes regarding criminal punishment and the death penalty, though images of God as loving and engaged in the world were not.

Expanding the notion of God's character, Unnever, Cullen, and Applegate (2005) conceptualized the image of God as a continuum with a loving and benevolent God at one end and a distant and judgmental God at the other (Greeley, 1995) to explain an individual's support for the death penalty and harsher courts. Using a scale that consisted of four semantic differential items asking respondents to place their image of God between two opposing adjectives (father vs. mother, master vs. spouse, judge vs. lover, and king vs. friend) on a scale of 1 to 7, they found the scale to be inversely related to support for both, as hypothesized. Unnever's later research further confirmed the importance of incorporating a loving God image into the study of attitudes toward capital punishment (Unnever, Bartkowski, & Cullen, 2010; Unnever et al., 2006). Unnever et al.'s conceptual expansion was a contribution to criminological research on religion, but their God imagery measure is potentially problematic as it might have had people conceive God to be either benevolent or judgmental as opposed to being both benevolent and judgmental or neither. In fact, the former conception seems what Unnever et al. (2006) had in mind: "We reason that people who have a personal relationship with a loving God *reject* the worldview that punitiveness is an appropriate response to human failings" (p. 842, emphasis added).

This reasoning tends to be at odds with teachings of different religions. For example, Judeo-Christian religion emphasizes both God's judgment (i.e., punishment for sin) and benevolence (i.e., forgiveness of sinners) (Applegate et al., 2000; Unnever et al., 2005; Unnever et al., 2006). After all, there is nothing to forgive unless something was judged to be wrong, and, once judged, justice calls for punishment, whether intended for deterrence, retribution, or rehabilitative restoration. Similarly, according to Qur'an, Allah is not only severe in punishment for sin and transgression (5:2) but also forgiving and merciful (2:199). Although Buddhists and Hindus do not espouse monotheism like Jews, Christians, and Muslims, if asked, they are likely to agree that "God" is loving based on Buddha's and Krishna's teachings of compassion as well as judgmental about "sin" because of their belief in the law of karma. Therefore, we reason that God's loving compassion and just punitiveness coexist just as forgiveness and punishment may (Braithwaite, 1989). An implication of this coexistence is that we

need to treat different images of God as conceptually distinct, though theoretically related to one another.

Images of God and deviance

For Froese and Bader (2010), two key questions that help understand an individual's belief in God concern the extent to which God judges and interacts with the world. They treated God's love separately from God's judgment and engagement based on the finding that a loving God was a universal view in America according to national surveys. For those who believe in the existence of God, whether with some doubts or not, God is their "generalized other" or their internal conversation partner (Mead, 1934). Thus, an individual's cognitive schema of image of God is likely to affect his or her attitudes and behaviors, including crime and deviance.

Before examining relationships between images of God and various attitudes and behaviors based on data from the 2005 and 2007 Baylor Religion Survey, Froese and Bader (2010) explored whether a person's demographic characteristics and religious affiliation were related to the person's image of God and found a complicated set of relationships. For example, Catholics tended to believe in an engaged-but-nonjudgmental or neither-engaged-nor-judgmental God, whereas Mainline Protestants were likely to believe in an engaged-but-nonjudgmental or disengaged-but-judgmental God compared to Evangelical Protestants who mostly believed in an engaged-and-judgmental God. Jews and those who identified "other religion," however, were less likely to have the image of Evangelical Protestants, whereas the followers of "other religion" tended to hold the image of an engaged-but-nonjudgmental or neither-engaged-nor-judgmental God as well. Interestingly, those of "no religion" also had their own images of God, being less likely to believe in an engaged-and-judgmental or disengaged-but-judgmental God than Evangelical Protestants.

Specifically, Froese and Bader (2010) examined the image of God in terms of a fourfold typology: authoritative (engaged and judgmental), benevolent (engaged but nonjudgmental), critical (disengaged but judgmental), and distant God (disengaged and nonjudgmental). For example, the 2007 Baylor Religion Survey (Baylor University, 2007) showed Whites and non-Whites were likely to believe in a distant God and a benevolent God, respectively, but no race difference was found in belief in the other Gods. Income was associated with belief in engaged and disengaged God (positively with a benevolent God and a distant God but inversely with an authoritative God and a critical God), whereas education was related only to belief in disengaged God (positively to a distant God and negatively to a critical God). Males and females were more likely to believe in a critical God and a benevolent God, respectively, though no different in belief in the other Gods.

On the other hand, Froese and Bader (2010) found consistent differences in religiosity between those who believed in an engaged and disengaged God, regardless of their belief in a judgmental God. That is, believers of an engaged God tended to describe themselves as "very religious" compared to those of a disengaged God. The former were also more likely to attend church often and have religious experiences, which they call "miracles" (e.g., "felt called by God" or "hearing the voice of God speak"), than the latter (see also Froese & Bader, 2007).

Froese and Bader (2010) then tested whether the scales of belief in God's judgment and God's engagement as well as the dummy variable of belief in an engaged God were

associated with various attitudes and behaviors, among which we focus here on those relevant to crime and deviance. First, consistent with their finding that those who believed in an engaged-and-judgmental God were the most likely to be moral absolutist in terms of attitudes toward ascetic deviance (premarital and extramarital sex), both images of judgmental and engaged God were positively related to absolutist attitudes toward gay marriage. Similarly, belief in an engaged God and, to a lesser extent, belief in a judgmental God were positively related to restrictive attitudes toward abortion across various conditions. Finally, those who believed in an engaged God were more compassionate toward the sick and needy than those with a disengaged God.

These findings from the Baylor Religion Survey (Baylor University, 2007) tend to be consistent with those based on other survey data. Analyzing the 1998 International Social Survey Program (ISSP Research Group, 2000) data from eight (including the United States) of 32 participating countries, Froese and Bader (2008) found that believers in an authoritative and active or engaged God in each of the countries tended to hold traditional moral attitudes toward issues of sex and abortion (see also Bader & Froese, 2005). They also found those believers in America to favor capital punishment. In addition, the image of judgmental God was found to be inversely associated with helping others via volunteering for the community independent of their place of worship (Mencken & Fitz, 2013). This inverse relationship might have been partly because believers of a judgmental God were less likely to trust other people and thus less compassionate toward them, whereas those of a loving God were more likely to (Hinze, Mencken, & Tolbert, 2011; Mencken, Bader, & Embry, 2009).

Our review of prior research tends to suggest that believers in an engaged God should be less likely to commit crime because they tend to be more religiously involved and compassionate toward other people (which tend to reduce criminality) than those in a disengaged God (Froese & Bader, 2010). Similarly, we expect the image of forgiving God to be inversely related to crime as it is likely to give an individual a sense of gratitude and indebtedness to God, which in turn would increase religious involvement and forgiving and compassionate attitude toward other people (Applegate et al., 2000), which in turn would decrease criminality. Finally, belief in God's judgment is also likely to be related inversely to crime given its positive association with not only religious involvement but also moral absolutist, conventional attitudes toward deviance.

In this study, we examine relationships between images of God and deviant behavior among prison inmates, so we now turn to a review of literature on prison misconduct.

Prior research on prison misconduct

Prison misconduct is defined as the failure by inmates to follow institutional rules and regulations (Camp, Gaes, Langan, & Saylor, 2003) and varies in seriousness from disobeying orders and possession of "contraband" (i.e., alcohol, drugs, etc.) to assaults against staff and other inmates. Although not synonymous with *criminal offending*, prison misconduct is a significant predictor of recidivism (Duwe, 2014; Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996). Both being rule violations, they are different behavioral outcomes of a common underlying propensity to deviance (Osgood, Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1988). As a result, they share many of the same risk and protective factors, which may be why correctional interventions tend to have similar effects on both outcomes.

Prior research has found dynamic and, to a greater extent, static factors to be associated with misconduct and recidivism. The former include factors such as antisocial companions and social achievement (e.g., marital status, level of education, employment, etc.) (Gaes, Wallace, Gilman, Klein-Saffran, & Suppa, 2002; Tewksbury, Connor, & Denney, 2014), whereas the latter are factors like criminal history, age, and race (Cihan, Sorensen, & Chism, 2017; Gendreau, Goggin, & Law, 1997; Kolivoski & Shook, 2016; Steiner, Butler, & Ellison, 2014; Valentine, Mears, & Bales, 2015). Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy tends to be one of the most effective interventions for curbing disciplinary infractions (French & Gendreau, 2006) and recidivism (Lipsey, Landenberger, & Wilson, 2007). Education and employment programming have also been found to reduce recidivism (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013) and misconduct (Duwe, Hallett, Hays, Jang, & Johnson, 2015; Gover, Pérez, & Jennings, 2008; Pompoco, Wooldredge, Lugo, Sullivan, & Latessa, 2017; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2014), though their effectiveness has been more modest and sometimes inconsistent.

Although some studies failed to find an association between religiosity and prison misconduct (Johnson, 1987; Pass, 1999), others show that religiosity is inversely related to disciplinary infractions (Camp, Daggett, Kwon, & Klein-Saffran, 2008; Clear & Sumter, 2002; Kerley, Copes, Tewksbury, & Dabney, 2011; Kerley, Matthews, & Blanchard, 2005; O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002). Most notably, Kerley et al. (2005) found less misconduct among prisoners who believed in a higher power, attended the prison's faith-based program, and regularly attended religious services than those who did not. In a later study, Kerley et al. (2011) also reported that attending a religious class or group was inversely associated with misconduct, while praying privately and watching a religious broadcast on television were not.

The present study

We propose to examine whether inmates who have the image of a forgiving, judgmental, or engaged God tend to commit lower levels of misconduct partly because they are more likely to be religious than those who do not. Our proposed causality is based on previous findings that religiosity is more likely to influence crime than vice versa (Burkett & Warren, 1987; Hoffmann, 2014; Johnson, Jang, Larson, & Li, 2001), though we examine prison misconduct as a proxy of crime. In addition, though relationships between religious belief (i.e., image of God) and other dimensions of religiosity (Glock, 1962) are likely to be reciprocal, we propose that religious belief precedes religious feeling and practice based on Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory, where cognition (beliefs) is antecedent to affect (attitudes), which in turn influences behavior.

For a parsimonious model, we propose to combine the two noncognitive dimensions and examine a relationship between the religious belief (image of God) and religious feeling/practice. We also examine an inmate's conversion experience (Maruna, 2001; Maruna, Wilson, & Curran, 2006), which we keep separate from religious practice/feeling because it is neither a part of religious practices nor exclusively religious feeling. We refer to *religious practice/feeling* and *conversion* together as "religious involvement."

Based on the existing literature, we propose the following hypotheses.

- Hypothesis 1: The images of forgiving, judgmental, and engaged God are likely to be inversely associated with misconduct among prison inmates.
- Hypothesis 2: Inverse relationships between the image of God and prison misconduct are attributable in part to an inmate's religious involvement.

Method

Data

Data to test our hypotheses came from an anonymous survey we conducted at the Main Prison of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (a.k.a. Angola) in 2015. We developed a questionnaire that included items to measure our key concepts as well as inmates' socio-demographic and criminal justice-related backgrounds. An initial version of the questionnaire was pretested with 11 inmates at Angola, and the final version was prepared based on their feedback on wording as well as content of questions.

We administered paper-and-pencil surveys dorm by dorm to all male inmates at the Main Prison between March and May of 2015, during which the facility's inmate population was about 3,000 in total. All the inmates at the Main Prison were of the same maximum-security level, and about three fourths of them ($N = 2,249$) participated in the survey. Because we conducted an anonymous survey so inmates might report as accurately and honestly as possible, we could not examine whether and how the non-participating inmates were different from the participants. Although this limitation needs to be kept in mind when results are interpreted, the high response rate and large sample size offer an unusual opportunity to study images of God and misconduct among inmates at America's largest maximum-security prison.

Measures

The ultimate endogenous variable, prison misconduct, was measured by a survey item asking inmates about their disciplinary convictions during the last 2 years prior to our survey (1 = *none*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *twice*, 4 = *3 – 5 times*, 5 = *6 or more*). We focus on disciplinary conviction because it is an official measure of misconduct and a formal reaction to confirmed infraction, which we believe inmates are less likely to under-report or not report at all given their perception that their answer could or would be verified by their prison records. We considered 2-year window to be sufficient to capture enough variation in prison misconduct.

To measure the construct *God's engagement*, we used four items asking inmates what they thought God was like based on their "personal understanding." They include (1) "concerned with the well-being of the world," (2) "directly involved in what happens in the world," (3) "concerned with my personal well-being," and (4) "directly involved in what happens to me" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). Exploratory factory analysis showed that the items were all loaded on a single factor with loadings of .750, .687, .841, and .798, respectively, and had high interitem reliability (α = .848).

For the construct *God's judgment*, we employed six items, two of which were asked in the same way that the four God's engagement items were: (1) "angered by my sins" and (2) "angered by human sins." Inmates were also asked how well the words (3) "critical," (4) "punishing," (5) "wrathful," and (6) "severe" described God in "their opinion," using the same 4-point Likert-type scale. Factor analysis of the six items (with direct oblimin rotation) generated two factors: one with the "angered" items (.805 and .887), and another with the adjective items (.644, .755, .754, and .661). Based on this finding, we decided to model God's judgment as hierarchical factor that has two first-order factors, one measured by the two "angered" items (α = .821) and the other by the four adjective items (α = .801). On the other hand, we measured the image of

forgiving God, God's forgiveness, using one of the adjective items, that is, an item asking inmates how well the word *forgiving* described God in their opinion.

An inmate's religious involvement was operationalized by two latent variables. The construct of religious practice/feeling was measured by five items of ritualistic (behavior or practice) and experiential (feeling) dimensions of religiosity (Froese & Bader, 2007; Glock, 1962). They include religious service attendance, praying outside of religious services, reading a sacred text in private, perceived closeness to God, and importance of religion, which factor analysis showed were loaded on a single factor with high loadings, ranging from .638 to .792, and high interitem reliability, .801 (see Appendix A). We also measured an inmate's religious conversion in terms of Maruna et al.'s (2006) concept of conversion narrative using six items constructed based on five distinct ways in which Maruna et al. said conversion narrative achieves identity-crisis management function among prison inmates. The six items were loaded on a single factor with high loadings, ranging from .531 to .773, and high Cronbach's α, .839 (see Appendix A).

To control for sources of spuriousness, we measured an inmate's religious and criminal as well as sociodemographic backgrounds. First, religious background was measured by an inmate's religious affiliation using four dummy variables of Catholic, Islam, other religion (which included Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and "other religion"), and no religion with Protestant being a reference category.

Next, a composite measure of prior offending was the mean of five items about lifetime number of arrests, incarceration in an adult prison before coming to Angola, and convictions for violent, property, and drug offenses (see Appendix A). The first two items and the average of the last three were loaded on a single factor with high loadings, ranging from .640 to .820, and had an acceptable inter-item reliability (α = .709). An inmate's *length of sentence* being served was measured based on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *less than 10 years*, 2 = *11 – 20 years*, 3 = *21 – 30 years*, 4 = *31 – 40 years*, 5 = *more than 40 years*, 6 = *life*), and number of years at Angola was based on inmate's self-report. In addition, we measured an inmate's participation in nonreligious programs by adding two items asking inmates whether they had ever participated or were enrolled in some type of educational and vocational program at the time of our survey.

Finally, prior research shows that an inmate's age, marital status (i.e., married), being a parent, and level of education are inversely related to misconduct in prison, whereas criminal history and being non-White are positively related (Cihan et al., 2017; Gaes et al., 2002; Gendreau et al., 1997; Kolivoski & Shook, 2016; Steiner et al., 2014; Tewksbury et al., 2014; Valentine et al., 2015). To control for these sociodemographic characteristics, we measured an inmate's *age* in years, race (two dummy variables of Black and other race with White being a reference category), and marital status (three dummies of single, divorced/separated, and widowed with married being a reference category). In addition, we measured whether an inmate had children (1 = yes, 0 = no) and his level of education (1 = *never attended school*, 2 = *8th grade or less*, 3 = *9th-12th grade [no high school diploma]*, 4 = *high school graduate*, 5 = *some college [no college diploma]*, 6 = *trade, technical, or vocational training*, 7 = *college graduate*, 8 = *postgraduate degree*).

Analytic strategy

We applied a structural equation modeling approach to test our hypotheses. Latent-variable modeling is appropriate given that most of our key concepts are abstract and

thus not observable (e.g., image of God and religious conversion). It also enables us to control for measurement errors so we can test hypotheses based on more valid and reliable results than what manifest-variable modeling would produce (Bollen, 1989).

For model estimation, we employed Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017), which enables us to estimate multiple structural equations simultaneously, controlling for measurement errors. Because most of this study's measures are ordered categorical variables, the (maximum likelihood estimation), which generates "parameter estimates with standard errors ... that are robust to non-normality and non-independence of observations" was employed (Muthén & Muthén, 2017, p. 668). Further, Muthén's (1983) "general structural equation model" and its full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation, incorporated into Mplus, allowed us to include not only continuous (e.g., age) but also dichotomous (e.g., children) and ordered polytomous variables (e.g., education) in the model. To treat missing data, FIML, one of two "state-of-the-art" methods along with multiple imputation, was applied (Schafer & Graham, 2002, p. 147).

For data-model fit assessment, we used Hu and Bentler's (1999) "2-index presentation strategy" (p. 1), focusing on three fit indices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). They found that using a cutoff value of .96 for CFI in combination with that of .09 (or .10) for SRMR "resulted in the least sum of Type I and Type II error rates" (p. 28). The same was found when they replaced CFI with RMSEA using a cutoff value of .06. Thus, two combinational rules were used to evaluate model fit: (CFI ≥ .96 and SRMR ≤ .09) and (SRMR ≤ .09 *and* RMSEA ≤ .06).

Results

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage distributions of nominal-level variables and the descriptive statistics of others along with a number of valid observations for each variable. Inmates included in our analysis were, on average, about 45 years old, and their average education fell between "high school graduate" (including Graduate Equivalency Diploma [GED]) and "some college (no college diploma)," though its mode was "9th-12th grade (no high school diploma)" (26.3%, not shown in table). A majority (62.3%) of the inmates were Black, whereas the remainder were White (28.3%) and other race (9.5%), which consisted of Hispanic (1.8%), Native American (1.0%), Asian (.7%), Pacific Islander (.1%), mixed race (4.3%), and "other race" (1.6%) inmates. Slightly more than one half of them were single or never married, but almost three fourths were fathers of at least one child.

On average, inmates of this study were serving a sentence of "31 – 40 years" or "more than 40 years," had been at Angola about 14 years, and had participated or were enrolled in educational or vocational program for at least a month at the time of our survey. The mean of disciplinary convictions during the past 2 years prior to our survey was almost two, whereas their misconduct varied across the 5-point scale: 0 (*none*) (53.4%, not shown in table), 1 (*once*) (21.8%), 2 (*twice*) (12.3%), 3 (*3–5 times*) (8.7%), and 4 (*6 or more*) (3.9%).

More than 90% of inmates had a religious affiliation: Christianity (77.4%; 61.6% Protestant and 15.8% Catholic), Islam (4.7%), and other religion (5.5%)—Judaism (.6%), Hinduism (.1%), Buddhism (.2%), and "other" (4.6%) combined (not shown in table), whereas 12.4% said that they had no religion. A typical inmate reported that he attended religious service and prayed outside of service between "once a month" and "2–3 times a month," while reading the

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of variables used in analysis ($N = 2,249$).

Variable	n	Mean/%	SD	Min.	Max.	Variable	n	Mean/%	SD	Min.	Max.
Age	1,905	44.680	11.875	18	96	Disciplinary convictions	1,787	1.878	1.156	1	5
Race	1,926					Forgiving God	2,115	3.278	.881	1	4
White	545	28.30%				God's engagement	2,025	3.379	.694	1	4
Black	1,200	62.30%				(1) Concerned with (world)	1,982	3.520	.760	1	4
Other race	181	9.41%				(2) Directly involved (world)	1,925	3.167	.947	1	4
Marital status	1,932					(3) Concerned with (me)	1,953	3.475	.765	1	4
Single	1,080	55.90%				(4) Directly involved (me)	1,930	3.322	.870	1	4
Married	249	12.90%				God's judgment	2,019	2.884	.718	1	4
Divorced/Separated	526	27.30%				(1) Angered by my sins	1,940	2.924	1.038	1	4
Widowed	77	4.00%				(2) Angered by human sins	1,953	3.155	.991	1	4
Children	1,924	.748	.434	0	1	(3) Critical	1,807	2.534	1.086	1	4
Education	1,834	4.480	1.642	1	8	(4) Punishing	1,863	2.878	.985	1	4
Nonreligious programs	1,917	1.135	.783	0	2	(5) Wrathful	1,798	2.946	.987	1	4
Length of sentence	1,922	4.927	1.777	1	6	(6) Severe	1,810	2.780	1.090	1	4
Prior offending	1,938	1.948	.824	1	7	Religious practice/feeling					
Arrest	1,877	2.549	1.713	1	7	(1) religious service attendance	2,035	5.528	2.429	1	8
Incarceration	1,910	1.881	1.140	1	7	(2) praying outside of services	1,973	4.834	1.572	1	6
Conviction	1,906	1.782	.657	1	7	(3) reading religious text	1,953	5.737	2.421	1	8
Violent offense	1,853	1.889	.722	1	7	(4) closeness to God	1,955	3.863	1.103	1	5
Property offense	1,649	1.592	.939	1	7	(5) importance of religion	2,027	3.901	1.298	1	5
Drug offense	1,682	1.678	.997	1	7	Conversion narrative					
Years at Angola	1,599	12.859	10.253	0	74	(1) new identity that replaces	2,056	3.245	.851	1	4
Religious affiliation	1,983					(2) new meaning & purpose in life	2,087	3.446	.727	1	4
Protestant	1,222	61.62%				(3) becoming an agent of God	2,074	3.267	.822	1	4
Catholic	313	15.78%				(4) forgiven for my past	2,070	3.306	.808	1	4
Islam	93	4.69%				(5) a sense of control	2,063	2.976	.916	1	4
Other religion	110	5.55%				(6) opportunities to help me	2,090	3.494	.628	1	4
No religion	245	12.36%									

Bible or other sacred book outside of religious service a bit more often, between "2–3 times a month" and "about weekly." In addition, inmates, on average, felt either "somewhat close" or "pretty close" to God and said that religion was "fairly" to "very important" to them.

Table 2 presents estimated standardized coefficients (β) and their Standard Error (in parenthesis) of three structural equation models. The first two columns report a baseline model, where an inmate's misconduct (disciplinary convictions) was regressed on the three images of God (God's forgiveness, engagement, and judgment) with sociodemographic and criminal backgrounds held constant, whereas the next two columns show an intermediate model that controlled for religious as well as sociodemographic and criminal background. The last six columns show a final model estimated after adding the two latent endogenous variables of religious involvement (religious practice/feeling and conversion narrative) as mediators between the images of God and the ultimate endogenous variable (disciplinary convictions). We found the models had good fit to data as they all had RMSEA (.039, .036, and .037 < .06) and SRMR smaller than the maximum cutoff (.026, .025, and .034 < .09), whereas CFI failed to reach the minimum cutoff (.932, .929, and

Table 2. Structural model of God's judgment, God's engagement, and disciplinary convictions among prison inmates (N = 2,249): Standardized estimates.

| | Baseline Model | | Intermediate Model | | Final Model | | | | | |
| | Disciplinary Convictions | | Disciplinary Convictions | | Religious Practice/ Feeling | | Conversion Narrative | | Disciplinary Convictions | |
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Age	−.223*	(.034)	−.215*	(.035)	.148*	(.029)	.000	(.030)	−.228*	(.036)
Black	.086*	(.025)	.082*	(.026)	.102*	(.022)	.135*	(.021)	.107*	(.026)
Other race	.021	(.023)	.018	(.023)	.056*	(.021)	.042	(.021)	.024	(.023)
Single	.018	(.035)	.019	(.035)	−.072*	(.027)	−.019	(.026)	.021	(.034)
Divorced/Separated	−.021	(.029)	−.019	(.029)	−.007	(.023)	.017	(.022)	−.013	(.029)
Widowed	−.012	(.019)	−.013	(.019)	−.030	(.018)	−.011	(.019)	−.013	(.018)
Children	−.012	(.026)	−.012	(.026)	−.026	(.021)	−.018	(.022)	−.015	(.026)
Education	−.113*	(.024)	−.114*	(.025)	.094*	(.022)	.054*	(.022)	−.110*	(.025)
Prison programs	−.029	(.026)	−.026	(.026)	.003	(.023)	.060*	(.022)	−.015	(.026)
Length of sentence	.054	(.028)	.057*	(.028)	.034	(.025)	−.006	(.025)	.053	(.028)
Prior offending	.210*	(.029)	.207*	(.030)	−.040	(.023)	−.005	(.023)	.210*	(.028)
Years at Angola	.119*	(.034)	.116*	(.034)	−.136*	(.030)	.006	(.031)	.128*	(.035)
Catholic			−.018	(.025)	−.027	(.021)	−.041*	(.020)	−.025	(.025)
Islam			.010	(.027)	.039	(.021)	−.017	(.021)	.005	(.028)
Other religion			.035	(.026)	−.006	(.020)	−.041	(.023)	.025	(.025)
No religion			.061*	(.028)	−.346*	(.027)	−.113*	(.026)	.061	(.032)
Religious practice/ feeling					1.000				.078	(.053)
Conversion narrative					.481*	(.034)	1.000		−.230*	(.051)
God's forgiveness	−.067*	(.026)	−.060*	(.026)	.157*	(.022)	.265*	(.023)	−.008	(.028)
God's engagement	−.084*	(.037)	−.061	(.038)	.443*	(.035)	.492*	(.034)	.016	(.046)
God's judgment	.030	(.042)	.028	(.042)	−.040	(.038)	.018	(.036)	.033	(.041)
R^2	.127*	(.0160)	.131*	(.016)	.555*	(.026)	.529*	(.025)	.151*	(.018)
Model fit index										
Chi-squared statistic	626.743		692.084		1984.767					
(df, p value)	(144,	.000)	(176,	.000)	(487,	.000)				
Root mean square error of approximation	.039		.036		.037					
[90% Confidence interval]	[.036,	.042]	[.033,	.039]	[.035,	.039]				
Comparative Fit Index	.932		.929		.912					
Standardized root mean square residual	.026		.025		.034					

*p < .05 (two-tailed test).

.912 < .96). The model's good fit was also evidenced by the measurement model of high factor loadings (.500 or higher) with one exception, .400 after rounding (see Appendix B). Thus, the results are worth interpreting.

The baseline model shows that our first hypothesis was partially supported as we found God's forgiveness (−.067) and engagement (−.084) to be related inversely to disciplinary convictions, though God's judgment was not (.030). When an inmate's religious affiliation was added to the model, however, God's engagement was no longer significantly related to misconduct (−.061). A closer examination of the intermediate model revealed that the only dummy variable of religious affiliation related to disciplinary convictions (.061), no religion (with Protestant being a reference category), was correlated inversely with God's engagement (−.326, SE = .030; not shown in table). That is, we found inmates who believed in God's engagement to report less misconduct than those who did not because they were more likely to be Protestant Christians (who tended to have less misconduct) than inmates with no religion.

Also found to be significantly correlated with God's engagement was the dummy variable of other religion (−.105, SE = .031), though it was not significantly related to disciplinary convictions (.035; see Table 2). In addition, one-way ANOVA showed that Protestant inmates (3.511) reported significantly higher mean of 4-item scale of God's engagement than their Catholic (3.380), Muslim (3.256), and other religion (3.116) as well as no religion counterparts (2.844). The mean of no-religion inmates was significantly lower than that of their Catholic, Muslim, and other religion as well as Protestant counterparts.

When we added the two mediators of religious involvement (whose relationship was specified as correlation between their residuals and estimated to be .481, as presented in a box), the coefficient of God's forgiveness (−.060) became nonsignificant (−.008), indicating that the inverse relationship between the image of a forgiving God and misconduct was mediated by an inmate's religious involvement, particularly conversion narrative. That is, though God's forgiveness was positively associated with religious practice/feeling (.157) as well as conversion narrative (.265), only the latter measure of religious involvement was inversely related to disciplinary convictions (−.230). Results from testing the mediation, reported in Table 3, show that the indirect effect of God's forgiveness on disciplinary convictions via conversion narrative was significant (−.061), though the indirect effect via religious practice/feeling was not (.012), as anticipated given the nonsignificant relationship between religious practice/feeling and disciplinary convictions (.078). In sum, our second hypothesis received partial support.

We found several variables of sociodemographic and criminal backgrounds to be related to endogenous variables mostly in the expected direction. For example, older inmates were more likely to report religious practice, closeness to God, and importance

Table 3. Indirect effects of image of god on disciplinary convictions via religious involvement.

Image of God		Religious Involvement		Prison Misconduct	β	SE
God's forgiveness	→	Religious practice/feeling	→	Disciplinary convictions	.012	(.008)
		Conversion narrative			−.061*	(.014)
God's engagement	→	Religious practice/feeling	→	Disciplinary convictions	.034	(.024)
		Conversion narrative			−.113*	(.027)
God's judgment	→	Religious practice/feeling	→	Disciplinary convictions	−.003	(.004)
		Conversion narrative			−.004	(.008)

*p < .05 (two−tailed test).

of religion and less misconduct than their younger counterparts, whereas Blacks were more religious in terms not only of religious practice/feeling but also conversion narrative than Whites (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999), though the former reported more misconduct than the latter. Although positively related to religious involvement, education was inversely to disciplinary convictions. In addition, as anticipated, an inmate's prior offending in terms of arrest, conviction, and incarceration was positively associated with misconduct.

Finally, when we conducted a supplemental analysis by dichotomizing disciplinary convictions (i.e., 0 = none, 1 = one or more), the overall results remained the same (complete results are available upon request).

Discussion and conclusion

The number of studies on the influence of religiosity on crime has increased over the past several decades (Johnson & Jang, 2010). The scope of their religiosity concept, however, has decreased compared to that of their early counterparts. Later studies tend to neglect religious belief, a key aspect of religiosity (Durkheim, 1912/1981), though focusing on religious behavior, experience, and belonging. Interestingly, according to Froese and Bader (2007), the same has happened in the sociology and psychology of religion. To address the issue, focusing on an individual's belief in God's engagement and judgment, Froese and Bader (2010) found that they were related to the attitudes and behaviors of believers. Criminologists have also found images of God to be related to attitudes toward criminal punishment, and belief in a loving and forgiving God was associated with support for rehabilitation (Applegate et al., 2000; Unnever et al., 2005). The image of God, however, has not been examined yet in relation to crime or deviance.

To address the gap in research, we tested two hypotheses using survey data collected from inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary or "Angola." We found partial support for the first hypothesis about relationships between three images of God and disciplinary convictions among the inmates. As expected, the more inmates believed in a forgiving and engaged God, the more likely they were to report relatively low levels of disciplinary convictions. We found the observed inverse relationship between the image of engaged God and misconduct to be attributable to Protestant inmates, who tended to believe in an engaged God, reporting less misconduct compared to those who had no religion. The image of judgmental God, on the other hand, was not significantly related to misconduct. The second hypothesis also received partial support as we found the inverse relationship between the image of forgiving God and misconduct was mediated by an inmate's conversion narrative, though not by the inmate's religious practice/feeling. That is, inmates who believed in a forgiving God tended to have experienced or be in the process of religious conversion, which in turn was inversely related to misconduct.

Why were the images of a forgiving and engaged God related to misconduct among offenders in prison, whereas that of a judgmental God was not? First, the latter finding might be attributable in part to the nature of our research site or sample. That is, Angola has often been recognized as America's harshest prison, where about nine out of 10 inmates will die while incarcerated because a life sentence in Louisiana means "natural life" with no opportunity for parole or early release of any kind (Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, & Duwe, 2017). As a result, the image of judgmental God is likely to be prevalent and thus have limited variation among inmates at Angola, thereby being unlikely to be

associated with misconduct among them. To the extent that this speculation is valid, future research on data collected from a minimum or medium security prison might find an inmate's belief in a judgmental God to be related to misconduct. In addition, it would be interesting to see if our hypothesis about the image of judgmental God would receive support when data from non-offenders in the general population are analyzed.

Next, the image of engaged and, to a greater extent, forgiving God might have been inversely associated with misconduct among inmates at Angola because personal care, concern, and forgiveness are rare in such a setting of harsh punishment and hardened criminals despite being crucial to rehabilitation and behavioral change among prison inmates. That is, an inmate's belief in God as not only being concerned with his personal well-being and directly involved in what happens to him but also willing to forgive him so he may live a new life is likely to motivate the inmate to be open to change and rehabilitate himself, including avoiding misconduct in prison, through identity transformation (Giordano, Longmore, Schroeder, & Seffrin, 2008; Jang, Johnson, Hays, Hallett, & Duwe, 2017). God's forgiveness for an inmate's wrongs done to his family and friends as well as those victimized by crimes he committed is also likely to give the inmate a sense of hope for change and new life.

We found the relationship between the image of forgiving God and misconduct to be attributable to an inmate's narratives of religious conversion, though not his religious practices (how often he attended religious services, prayed alone, and read a sacred text on his own) and feelings (closeness to God and importance of religion). This finding, however, does not necessarily mean that religious practice and feeling among prison inmates are not relevant to the explanation of their behaviors given what prior research reports (Johnson, 2011; Kerley et al., 2011; Kerley et al., 2005), but might show potentially limited construct validity of those measures of religiosity when used in a study of prison inmates. In a prison setting, for example, frequent attendance of religious services may not always indicate intrinsic religiosity (religious involvement for the sake of religion), though it might reflect extrinsic religiosity, in which inmates use religion to fulfill their needs such as social relations and personal benefits, like food (Clear, Hardyman, Stout, Lucken, & Dammer, 2000).

A practical implication of the present finding is that religious programs in prison and the community's ministry efforts aimed at the rehabilitation of inmates are more likely to be effective when they emphasize God's forgiveness and engagement relative to God's judgment and anger. Inmates already have ample experience with punitive judgment, especially in maximum security environments as harsh as Angola, but a message of personal concern and forgiveness comes as a welcome alternative and thus resonates among them. Religious programs should of course remain voluntary for inmates regardless of their rehabilitative efficacy, whether facilitated through state chaplaincy programs or community volunteers. Indeed, an inmate's personal willingness to volunteer for religious programs is a key component of these programs' success, and any attempt to coerce participation would be misguided and constitutionally prohibited. Our contention is that religious programs that emphasize God's forgiveness and engagement should be readily available to those inmates personally predisposed to participate. In other words, we commend religious programs as a promising option for some inmates, not as a mandatory intervention for all. Likewise, the state should not dictate the content or emphasis of religious programs based on pragmatic outcomes, but understanding the correlation

between God's forgiveness and engagement and reduced misconduct may help chaplains and volunteers to craft their presentations within the parameters of their respective traditions and consciences.

As acknowledged, a key methodological limitation of this study is its use of cross-sectional data in studying causal relationships. Although we proposed a causal relationship between religiosity and prison misconduct based on prior research, we estimated the influence of image of God and religious involvement on prison misconduct by regressing past behavior (i.e., disciplinary convictions over the past two years prior to our survey) on current belief, feeling, and behavior (i.e., measured at the time of our survey). We call for longitudinal research to examine reciprocal relationships as well as establishing causal order among the key constructs.

Future research is also called for given that we analyzed data from a sample of male prison inmates. That is, researchers need to examine relationships among images of God, religious involvement, and misconduct based on data collected from female prison inmates given gender differences in religiosity including intrinsic religiosity (Houltberg, Henry, Merten, & Robinson, 2011; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Another limitation concerns our use of self-reported data on prison misconduct and prior offending. Problems with self-reported data have been studied (e.g., Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981), and researchers tend to find measurement errors of self-reported data to be generally random rather than systematic (Farrington, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, & Schimidt, 1996; Jolliffe et al., 2003; Piquero, Macintosh, & Hickman, 2002). As a result, "self-report data appear acceptably valid and reliable for most research purposes" (Thornberry & Krohn, 2000, p. 33), which is consistent with our finding the construct validity of our misconduct and prior offending measures as they are related to other variables as well as with each other in the expected direction.

In conclusion, despite the limitations, we believe this study contributes to the literature on religion and prison misconduct and potentially faith-based programs striving to aid the process of offender rehabilitation and prisoner reentry. We found religious belief to be significant in research on religion and crime. We also found that the image of a caring and, particularly, forgiving God tends to have a positive impact on offender behavior compared to that of judgmental and angry God, perhaps because the former is more likely to lead offenders to develop virtues such as gratitude, humility, and accountability than the latter. Finally, we call for future research on the image of God in relation to crime, delinquency, and drug use based on data collected from outside as well as inside of prison.

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Appendix A. Items used in analysis

Variable	Survey Items (Response Categories)	Loading (α)
Religious practice/feeling	How often do you currently attend religious services at a place of worship?	(.801)
	(1 = *never*, 2 = *less than once a year*, 3 = *once or twice a year*, 4 = *several times a year*, 5 = *once a month*, 6 = *2 − 3 times a month*, 7 = *about weekly*, 8 = *several times a week*)	.685
	About how often do you currently pray outside of religious services? (1 = *never*, 2 = *only on certain occasions*, 3 = *once a week or less*, 4 = *a few times a week*, 5 = *once a day*, 6 = *several times a day*)	.745
	Outside of attending religious services, about how often do you currently spend private time reading the Bible, Koran, Torah, or other sacred book? (1 = *never*, 2 = *less than once a year*, 3 = *once or several times a year*, 4 = *once a month*, 5 = *2 − 3 times a month*, 6 = *about weekly*, 7 = *several times a week*, 8 = *everyday*)	.792
	How close do you feel to God most of time? (1 = *not close at all*, 2 = *not very close*, 3 = *somewhat close*, 4 = *pretty close*, 5 = *extremely close*)	.638
	In general, how important is religion to you? (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *somewhat*, 3 = *fairly*, 4 = *very*, 5 = *extremely*)	.642
Conversion narrative	How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	
	(1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*)	(.839)
	1. I have a new identity that replaces the label of prisoner.	.655
	2. My experience of imprisonment led me to find new meaning purpose in life.	.684
	3. I have been empowered by becoming an agent of God.	.773
	4. I can explain how I have been forgiven for my past.	.803
	5. I have a sense of control over an unknown future.	.531
	6. I seek out opportunities to help me change.	.697
Prior offending – Arrest	In your whole life, how many times have you been arrested?	(.709)
	(1 = *1 − 2 times*, 2 = *3 − 5 times*, 3 = *6 − 10 times*, 4 = *11 − 15 times*, 5 = *16 − 20 times*, 6 = *21 − 25 times*, 7 = *26+ times*)	.738
– Incarceration	Before coming to Angola, how many times have you been incarcerated in an adult prison? (1 = *never*, 2 = *1 − 2 times*, 3 = *3 − 5 times*, 4 = *6 − 10 times*, 5 = *11 − 15 times*, 6 = *16 − 25 times*, 7 = *26+ times*)	.820
– Conviction	How many times have you been convicted of the following offenses? (1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *2 − 3 times*, 4 = *4 − 6 times*, 5 = *7 − 10 times*, 6 = *11 − 15 times*, 7 = *16+ times*) A violent offense (e.g., assault, rape, robbery, manslaughter, or murder) A property offense (e.g., burglary, larceny, author theft, fraud, or forgery) A drug offense (such as possessing, selling or manufacturing drugs)	.640

Appendix B. Measurement model of religious practice/feeling, conversion narrative, God's judgment, and God's engagement among prison inmates (N = 2,249)

Indicator[a]	Religious Practice/ Feeling		Conversion Narrative		God's Engagement		God's Judgment 1 (1st-order factor)		God's Judgment 2 (1st-order factor)		God's Judgment (2nd-order factor)	
	β	(SE)	β	(SE)	β	(SE)	β	(SE)	β	(SE)	β	(SE)
Religious practice/feeling												
(1) Religious service attendance	.693*	(.015)										
(2) Praying outside of services	.716*	(.017)										
(3) Reading religious text	.742*	(.015)										
(4) Closeness to God	.664*	(.020)										
(5) Importance of religion	.702*	(.019)										
Conversion narrative												
(1) New identity that replaces			.633*	(.020)								
(2) New meaning & purpose in life			.665*	(.020)								
(3) Becoming an agent of God			.822*	(.014)								
(4) Forgiven for my past			.799*	(.014)								
(5) A sense of control			.497*	(.022)								
(6) Opportunities to help me			.673*	(.019)								
God's engagement												
(1) Concerned with the well-being of the world					.763*	(.019)						
(2) Directly involved in what happens in the world					.651*	(.022)						
(3) Concerned with my personal well-being					.871*	(.013)						
(4) Directly involved in what happens to me					.776*	(.018)						
God's judgment												
(1) Angered by my sins							.769*	(.023)				
(2) Angered by human sins							.906*	(.021)				
(3) Critical									.588*	(.024)		
(4) Punishing									.767*	(.019)		
(5) Wrathful									.797*	(.018)		
(6) Severe									.636*	(.024)		
God's judgment 1 (1st-order factor)											.820*	(.069)
God's judgment 2 (1st-order factor)											.399*	(.047)

*p < .05 (two-tailed test)