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Institute of Criminology
University of Cambridge

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Could 'faith in action' transform rehabilitation? *

Dr. Ruth Armstrong
Institute of Criminology
University of Cambridge
Email: ra299@cam.ac.uk

In 2001 George Bush Jr. was elected president of the United States. With him came the domestic policy of 'compassionate conservatism'. Key to this policy was the creation of new federal funding structures that allowed competition for government contracts to run social services. The idea was to strengthen the capacities of local faith-based and community organisations considered well placed to meet the needs of local people.

In England and Wales we are currently undergoing the coalition government's criminal justice reforms that are hoping to 'transform rehabilitation'. These reforms have instigated the breakup of the National Probation Service and the creation of 'Community Rehabilitation Companies' (CRC's or 'tier 1 providers'). CRC's will aim to reduce reoffending and be paid on results. They will work through a supply chain of smaller charities and enterprises (tier 2 providers), who in turn will rely on local faith-based and community organisations (tier 3 providers). We are heading into a new era for England and Wales in which the funding structures for criminal justice will relate to the capacities of local faith-based and community organisations to meet the needs of local people and thus play their part in reducing reoffending. Sound familiar?

Research examining life after prison in the USA suggests that faith-communities could have an important role to play in ex-prisoner reentry.[1] This article returns to the USA under George Bush's presidency and looks at this in practice. It draws on the experiences of 48 men in their first year of life after prison, one of whom was Muslim and the rest were Christian. It describes their experiences of faith-communities post-release. It uses these experiences to suggest what faith-in-action might look like if faith-communities are to play a role in transforming rehabilitation.

Faith in action?

For the men in my study life after prison was difficult. Participants were conscious of their diminished social status. Their expectations were low, but their hopes high. As prisoners they had engaged in an 18 month pre-release programme where volunteers had reinforced their individual worth and acceptability, and demonstrated through their physical presence in the prison that there are people within broader society willing to reach out, to forgive, to accept and to support. However, the realities of life post-release, even with low expectations, were often bitterly disappointing. There was little comfort in being a different person facing the same struggles.

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[1] La Vigne et al., 2009, One Year Out: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas. *Returning Home Study.* Urban Institute, Justice Policy Centre; Johnson, B., 2008, The Faith Factor and Prisoner Reentry. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion,* 4.; Mears et al., 2006, Faith-based efforts to improve prisoner reentry: Assessing the logic and evidence. *Journal of Criminal Justice,* 34, 351-367; Petersilia, J., 2003, *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry,* Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press; McRoberts, O., 2002, Religion, Reform, community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry. *Reentry Rountable.* The Urban Institute.

Joining a faith-community

Involvement in faith-communities offered an escape from the social stigma felt by participants through supplying a forum in which to express a pro-social identity and to change routine activities associated with a criminal lifestyle.[2] However, among the 48 men there were notable differences in their experiences. I analysed their experiences and then divided them into three groups, those who did not re-offend (n=20), those who did re-offend but were not detected (n=13) and those who were re-imprisoned (n=15).[3] Those who did not reoffend found it easier to join faith-communities. They emphasised feeling welcomed, accepted and being held accountable through close relationships with individuals within the faith-community. They appreciated being able to be honest about their ex-prisoner status where this did not become too prominent a feature of their persona.

These elements were emphasised less by participants who were re-offending and those who were re-incarcerated. What this indicates is that the neediest ex-prisoners either were not finding these elements in the faith-communities they attended, or for some reason they were not able to connect with them. A prison mentality was more evident in their accounts of life after prison. They struggled to open up to people and bemoaned the lack of tangible help offered. Those that re-offended but were not re-incarcerated tended to form social bonds with colleagues, family and friends. Their illicit activities risked severing their links with faith-communities where they felt stigma associated with such behaviours. In contrast, at work and with friends 'social' offending such as drink driving or recreational drug use could be part of belonging.

Those who were re-incarcerated also struggled to form social bonds with people in faith-communities. They had low expectations of faith-communities and appeared unable to use their initiative to request hep that they badly needed. It is very difficult to take individual responsibility for success without either the means to do so or the wherewithal to access assistance. With the exception of some positive and strong relationships with volunteer mentors, re-incarcerated participants struggled to make pro-social connections with other individuals and instead found belonging among street folk who were similarly stigmatised and socially excluded.

Barriers to joining a faith-community

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[2] For the importance of this to the desistance process see Shapland, J. and Bottoms, A., 2011. Reflections on social values, offending and desistance among young adult recidivists. *Punishment and Society,* 13, 256-282.
[3] All detected reoffending resulted in re-imprisonment. Outcome groups were based on self-report and official statistics on reoffending two years post-release.

Barriers to continued involvement in faith-communities included practical matters such as a lack of transport, suitable clothing, parole restrictions and conflicts with employment schedules. Outside of these practicalities, another prevalent barrier was the perception of implicit exclusion due to the shame of continued illicit activities.

In his examination of faith in community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that it is only in church that one can dare to be a sinner.[4] But for many participants in this study, involvement in illicit activities, from cohabiting to smoking crack cocaine, stymied their engagement with faith-communities. Participants spoke of how they struggled with life outside, did not live in ways they felt were compatible with continued involvement, and did not want to divulge these difficulties to the people they knew in the faith-community because they felt embarrassed and feared rejection.

Overcoming the barriers

Between the difficulties of helplessness and hypermasculinity, ex-prisoners can be a difficult group to befriend. However, the ready and proven availability of help and support, should it be needed, appeared to go some way towards encouraging ex-prisoners to overcome a preference for self-reliance and the suppression of problems. One participant, Octavio, said he had never asked his faith-community for help and would rather not - but despite his reluctance he said he would if he really needed to, because he was confident that help would be there:

> Q: Would you ask them?
> A: No
> Q: Why not?
> A: I've got to do it myself. If I couldn't do it myself then I would ask.
> Q: Do you think they'd help?
> A: Yeah they would. They got this lady an apartment for six months. They helped this travelling minister get a bus. They will break their back to help people.

Octavio's faith-community had shown itself to be what Bauman calls an 'ethical community', one that could be trusted because it had demonstrated how it would "break [its] back to help people". For participants asking for help meant trusting their faith-communities; it involved a declaration of vulnerability and the need for assistance, and ex-prisoners, the categorically untrusted, find it difficult to trust.

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[4] Bonhoeffer, D., 1939. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community.* LondonL: SCM Press.

In God we Trust?

Participants often faced mistrust from faith-communities. Chris explained the lack of help for ex-prisoners in his wife's church on the basis that "they helped someone once, but he messed it up". Chris went to a different church. One minister told me that his church no longer helped ex-prisoners because they had once bought some clothes for someone coming out of prison but they "got burned" - the prisoner had taken the clothes but not attended church. When I asked Joel what faith-communities could do better to help ex-prisoners, he explained why he thought such mistrust was misguided. He said they should:

> Just accept you as the person you are. ... You've got to trust God to change my heart or
> do whatever. People don't understand that and they want to protect what they've got
> instead of saying "this is what God blessed you with, help somebody else."

For Joel, a faith-community being generous with material things was one way of demonstrating 'acceptance' and providing evidence of shared beliefs in a God who could "change my heart or do whatever". The availability of tangible help was therefore not only about meeting immediate needs, but about acknowledging worth through recognising personhood, belief in redemption, and demonstrating acceptance and belonging. The converse of this was the perception that faith-communities that were unwilling to risk helping ex-prisoners did not believe in their essential humanity (do not "accept you as the person you are"), and mistrusted the identity transformation purported by the ex-prisoner (do not "trust God to change my heart"). To put it in Bauman's terms, they offered an *aesthetic* community - "the joy of belonging without the discomfort of being bound".[5] They welcomed ex-prisoners to belong within their community, so long as it did not represent a cost to that community in terms of changing its shape or taxing its resources.

Transforming Rehabilitation – Transforming Communities

In his study on how people leave a life of crime Maruna found that a 'significant other' believing in the offender's identity transformation was part of the desistance process. He also argued, "[i]f one knows what personal myths seem most appealing to desisting persons, one can better direct the narrative reconstruction implicit in the rehabilitative efforts".[6] Where these 'personal myths' include

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[5] Bauman, Z., 2001. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World,* Cambridge, Polity Press, at p. 69.
[6] Maruna, S., 2001. *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives,* Washington DC, American Psychological Association, at p. 114.

belief in the transformational power of a God, but the very institutions dedicated to this common belief demonstrate doubt in this transformational power through not acting accordingly, they may struggle to be the 'significant other' that can buttress narrative reconstruction during the initial precarious transition from incarceration. Faith-communities that were more involved with socially excluded groups appeared to have a deeper understanding of the vital role of social action as evidence of shared belief in the potential for individual transformation. Ex-prisoners were more likely to remain in faith-communities that could engage with the practical aspects of their debilitated individual autonomy, because a lack of such help indicated a lack of shared belief, and it is the shared belief system that provides the basis for belonging in religious communities and the satisfaction that comes from this.[7] If faith-communities are merely forums for pro-social identity manifestation they will struggle to overcome the barriers that inhibit ex-prisoner involvement. Communities that overcame these difficulties responded to ex-prisoners who sought a forum in which to manifest the strength of their faith, through providing a community that showed solidarity in their weakness.

One church that stood out as a faith-community that was very successful in reaching out to ex-prisoners was situated in the wealthiest neighbourhood in the city, but had a specific mission "to create a safe-harbour for the hurt, the lost and the seeking". Its congregation was unusual in that it was mixed both in terms of race and socio-economic status. It had a distinct 'recovery' format to the service, which involved a time where congregants contributed by voluntarily sharing things they were celebrating. The first time that I attended, one member of the congregation stood up and celebrated the fact that even though this week he had relapsed and used drugs again, he had called his friends within the community, got help, and wanted to celebrate the fact he was still in church and had now been clean again for five days. The congregation clapped and cheered his 'success'. This was a church where people could fail and still belong. Six of the participants attended this church.

Conclusions

In their normative theory of community intervention Bazemore and Erbe suggest that community engagement with ex-prisoners is reciprocal and could increase collective efficacy through encouraging community engagement with issues of social justice.[8] My findings support this theory.

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[7] Lim, C. and Putnam, R.D., 2010. Religion, Social Networks and Life Satisfaction. *American Sociological Review*, 75, 914-933.

[8] Bazemore, G. and Erbe, C., 2003. Operationalizing the Community Variable in Offender Reentegration. *Youth Violence in Offender Reintegration*, 1, 246-275.

Faith-communities where participants found it easier to get involved, to benefit from involvement and to stay involved were those communities whose manifested a commitment to each other through engaging theologically and practically with the broader realities of their lives. Grand claims have been made about the potential for faith-community involvement with ex-prisoners to increase public safety[9] and reduce the risk of failure in reentry[10] but a note of caution is appropriate. It has been shown that joining a faith-community and later leaving is worse for reentry outcomes and recidivism than never going at all.[11] Where ex-prisoners pin their hopes on belonging among a group of like-minded individuals whom they believe share their faith, a pervading sense of isolation and dislocation even in their midst is a bitter disappointment. If faith-communities are to provide a "sacred safety net" for ex-prisoners[12] they will need to be adequately equipped for the task because if they are not, they could become part of the problem rather than the solution.

However, I am not without hope. If the 'Transforming Rehabilitation' agenda means faith-communities become better equipped to support ex-prisoners they could play an important role in supporting desistance. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all emphasise respecting the dignity of every person and reaching out to those in need. If faith-communities are capacitated and permitted to work with people in prison, are proactive in reaching out to ex-prisoners and responsive to the needs they find, they may be able to play a role in reducing reoffending. In my study ex-prisoners coped responsibly where they were helped responsively. McRoberts acknowledges that where crime is concerned we might expect faith-communities to "take a hard moral reform stance: speaking out against criminal acts, crusading to transform individual criminal lives and so on", but goes on to admonish that we should not forget the historical role of churches as moral agitators "who have targeted activism not so much at personal moral failures, but at society-wide ones."[13] This kind of 'faith in action', could really 'transform rehabilitation' if it means that faith-communities begin to agitate for the kind of societal transformations that could actually potentiate a rehabilitation revolution.

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[9] Hercik, J. 2003, Prisoner Reentry, Religion and Research. Department of Health and Human Services USA.

[10] Travis, J. and Visher, C. (eds.) 2005. *Prisoner Reentry and Crime in America*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press at p. 255-256.

[11] La Vigne et al., 2009, One Year Out: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas. *Returning Home Study.* Urban Institute, Justice Policy Centre.

[12] McRoberts, O., 2002, Religion, Reform, community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry. *Reentry Rountable.* The Urban Institute, at p. 7.

[13] Ibid. at p. 5.