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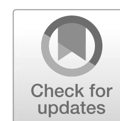

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Moral Injury, Post-incarceration Syndrome and Religious Coping Behind Bars

Theo van Willigenburg

Introduction: A Nearly Neglected Issue

This chapter finds its origin in my own experience. Many years ago, I was convicted on two occasions, for which I spent 26 months in prison. After my release I was treated for post-traumatic stress disorder. During my time behind bars I saw many inmates developing PTSD-symptoms. But I have also witnessed jail cell conversions and inmates becoming seriously religious, which seemed to be an effective coping mechanism. For me, as a convicted criminal, theologian, and philosopher this raised the question what religious coping behind bars exactly involves and why it seems to be an effective mechanism for some inmates.

In order to advance my research, I first analyzed studies on what is called post-incarceration syndrome (PICS), which is a term that refers to the "set of symptoms that are present in incarcerated and released

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prisoners that are caused by being subjected to prolonged incarceration in environments of punishment …" (Gorski 2014). The concept has emerged in the United States from clinical consultation with incarcerated prisoners (in the context of criminal justice system rehabilitation programs) and from the experience of community mental health centers working with recently released prisoners.

In the literature on trauma, PICS is a neglected issue. This is understandable. It seems morally apt not to pay attention to the traumas of perpetrators but to focus on the traumas of their victims. It may be that perpetrators suffer, but such is their own fault, whilst victims have not chosen their fate. This makes it difficult for me, as a former prisoner, to write about the traumatic experiences of incarceration and the religious ways of coping with such trauma. Even so, trauma is first and foremost a psychological concept which refers to the psychic wounds that are the source of specific stress symptoms, irrespective of whether the psychic wounds are caused by experiences which result from one's own choices and/or faults. Traumatic experiences are serious events "that shatter a person's integrity and induce powerlessness and estrangement" (Ganzevoort 2008, 20) irrespective of the source of those events. The humiliation and pains inflicted by incarceration of convicted criminals are no exception to this.

Taking trauma as a psychological concept does not mean that morality plays no role at all. Perpetrators may suffer from "moral injury" caused by the awareness that one has violated crucial norms and values (Jinkerson 2016; Lynd and Lynd 2017). I have experienced how difficult, if not impossible, it is to forgive oneself or at least to regain some minimal self-respect. Such experience has even more fueled my interest in the way religion may play a role in healing psychic wounds. As an incarcerated perpetrator one not only has to cope with what one has done but one also has to survive in a dangerous and degrading prison environment.

The first question to be answered in this chapter concerns the traumatizing effects of moral guilt and the symptoms caused by prolonged imprisonment. How can these traumatic effects and symptoms be characterized and what are the circumstances to which they are due? The second question concerns the religious ways of coping with traumas of incarcerated perpetrators, with a focus on the typical occurrence of prison

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conversions. What makes a religious conversion an effective coping mechanism for prisoners prone to suffer from traumata? We will take a "lived religion" perspective on jail cell conversions, understanding these in terms of the actual experiences, actions, thoughts, desires, and self-expressions of converts. At the same time, this chapter also makes a strong case for a lived religion approach that expands the understanding of conversion and recovery for trauma.

Characteristics of Post-incarceration Syndrome (PICS) and Moral Injury

Prevalence of PICS is not easily established, not only because of difficulties in performing empirical research among incarcerated subjects (and among released prisoners), but also because it is not easy to distinguish traumatic stress symptoms caused by experiences during incarceration from stress symptoms caused by pre-prison and post-prison experiences (Murphy 2004). Childhood experiences of incarcerated persons are a major source of trauma (Wolff and Jong 2012). Also, the prevalence of depression in long term prisoners might be related more to imported chronic ill health than to specific effects of imprisonment (Murdoch et al. 2008).

Even so, research has shown that prisoners not only exhibit symptoms of psychological and psychopathic disorder because they were mentally ill before they entered jail. The jail environment itself can have considerable effects on symptom levels (Gibbs 1987). A study among a sample of 1055 male long-term prisoners in 11 European countries has shown that 14 percent of them developed posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) subsequent to traumatic events experienced in prison. It appeared that the prevalence of traumata among the inmates included in the study was six times higher than in the general population and also significantly higher than among forensic psychiatric in-patients (Dudeck et al. 2011). These figures give rise to the conclusion that incarceration itself is a major cause of traumatic stress symptoms and that there is a recognizable post-incarceration syndrome caused by prolonged imprisonment.

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The following clusters of mental health symptoms can arguably be designated as belonging to such a post incarceration syndrome (Gorski 2014; DeVeaux 2013; Liem and Kunst 2013):

1. *PTSD symptoms* like sleep disturbance ("I was tormented by nightmares that I was still in prison. I'd wake up sittin' and screamin'"), agoraphobia ("If I get into crowds or I'm in open spaces … it brings on panic attacks"), and emotional numbing (never show or feel emotions, as this is a vital coping mechanism in prison) (Quotes from Liem and Kunst 2013, 334).
2. *Institutionalized personality traits* like paranoia ("You cannot trust anybody in the joint … I do have an issue with trust, I do not trust anybody," "you're always on edge …always feeling like someone's gonna attack you"), inability to engage in social relationships after release ("I am a kind of like detached," "You build up like this shell around you"), and hampered decision making after release because of the long period of autonomy-deprivation in prison ("Now you're bombarded with all these decisions it's like what, what, am I supposed to do here, you know?"). (Quotes from Liem and Kunst 2013, 335).
3. *Social-sensory deprivation syndromes* like spatial and temporal disorientation, social alienation (distrusting others, difficulty in engaging in relations), and a prolonged sense of insecurity ("When I got out and good things happened to me, I always thought that this cannot last long"). (Quotes from Liem and Kunst 2013, 336).

Whilst PICS has been studied more and more in the past decades, few research has been performed on the traumatic effects of "moral injury" in perpetrators understood as the injuries to their moral conscience and self-respect resulting from the serious moral transgressions they have committed (Shay 1991, 2014). Violating deeply held moral norms and values produces profound emotional guilt and shame, and in some cases also a sense of betrayal, anger and profound moral disorientation (Molendijk 2018). Moral guilt has originally been studied in military veterans who have witnessed or perpetrated acts in combat that transgressed their deeply held moral beliefs (Litz et al. 2009). Having violated deeply held moral values, their painful emotions of guilt and shame can become

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"deleterious in the long term … psychologically, behaviorally, spiritually, and socially" (Litz et al. 2009, 695). Due to the nature of such anguish treating moral injury is sometimes characterized as "soul repair," which already indicates the possible healing power of religious experiences (Brock 2013). In the United States, the military acknowledges the importance of spiritual care in treating veterans suffering from moral injury (Carey et al. 2016).

Although prisoner's experiences of moral injury differ from the experiences of soldiers in combat, such experiences are also very similar. The torment that, for example, convicted murderers may experience "is indistinguishable from that of many former combat veterans who killed a child, or failed to prevent the death of a comrade" (Lynd and Lynd 2017, chap. 1). Prisoners may feel that their own violent action before imprisonment or during imprisonment, or both, is unforgivable ("You'll never know what it is like to have killed a man. I would do anything to breathe life back into that man … If only there were some way I could talk to someone who loved that man, to ask forgiveness. But there is no way I can do that.") (Quotes from Lynd and Lynd 2017, chap. 5) Torn by feelings of guilt and shame prisoners may suffer from serious sleep deprivation ("One would wake in the night and scream or sit bold upright in bed"), depression and a low self-image ("He felt unworthy of love. Every day he lived with the knowledge of the terrible pain he had cause…"). (Quotes from Lynd and Lynd 2017, chap. 5) Prisoners (most of them) do not only suffer from the hard treatment they have to endure behind bars, some of them even more suffer from the moral anguish that tears their soul apart.

Background Causes

Having delineated the mental health symptoms involved in moral injury and PICS, the question is how these psychic wounds can be related to the circumstances prisoners are in. In the last decades Western countries have experienced an enormous growth in their prison population. And even in countries were nowadays fewer people are incarcerated, like in the Netherlands, there has been a continuous tendency to apply longer prison

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sentences with the result that prisoners experience the psychological strains of imprisonment for longer periods of time.

Prisons are mainly regarded as instruments to punish, to incapacitate and to keep certain individuals away from society. The prominence of these goals (and the neglect of the rehabilitation of prisoners) has strengthened the negative effects of incarceration (Travis et al. 2014). Two clusters of effects can be discerned:

1. Incapacitated Self-image Engendered by Guilt Trauma and a Culture of "Redemptive Violence"

Inmates know that they are punished because they have failed in their own eyes and in the eyes of society. Their sins have to be redeemed by the pains they suffer. This ideology of redemptive suffering shapes prison life. The permanent control of their daily life not only infantilizes inmates, but the miserable conditions under which they live "serve to repeatedly remind them of their compromised moral status and stigmatized social role as prisoners" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001, 6). This may result in a severely diminished sense of self-worth.

> The low position of inmates … creates a milieu of personal failure in which one's fall from grace is continuously pressed home. (Goffman 1961, 66)

Guilt and shame may be internalized up to a point in which

> prisoners may come to think of themselves as "the kind of person" who deserves only the degradation and stigma to which they have been subjected while incarcerated. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001, 7)

Prisons can therefore be understood as social environments in which, as a result of what Goffman (1961, 23–60) has labelled as a "mortification process", self-identity is profoundly questioned. This makes it difficult, if not impossible for prisoners to learn to cope with their feelings of guilt and shame and the resulting low self-image and depression. Learning to live with one's faults and regaining some self-respect is nearly impossible in an environment of constant humiliation and stigmatization.

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2. Incapacitated Autonomy and Fear in Environments Focused on Confinement and Punishment

One of the main characteristics of confinement in a "total institution" like a prison is the loss of nearly all forms of self-determination and thereby the loss of the capacity of autonomy.

> [T]otal institutions disrupt or defile precisely those actions that in civil society have the role of attesting to the actor and those in his presence that he has some command over his world, that he is a person with "adult" self-determination, autonomy, and freedom of action. (Goffman 1961, 47)

Prisoners have to adjust to the paramount muting of self-initiative, as the prison institution not only determines daily routine but also takes over nearly all decisions for its inhabitants. What is more: prisons impose meticulous and continuous surveillance and apply a fine-graded system of punishments (and rewards) in order to discipline the behavior and thoughts of the inmates (Van Willigenburg 2014, 369–382). Even small infractions of petty rules may be severely punished. The prison surrounds its inhabitants with such an extent network of enforceable regulations that inmates "gradually lose the capacity to rely on internal organization and self-imposed personal limits to guide their actions" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001, 5).

The impossibility to escape from discipline and the paramount threats of punishment lead to an attitude of constant alertness. Such hypervigilance is strengthened by the fact that prisons are the most dangerous places in society to reside because they bring together a frustrated and violent population (Haney and Lynch 1997). More than guards and officials, inmates fear each other (Wills 2014, 5). Personal safety is never guaranteed, neither in "humane" prison environments (Boone 2016, 81) nor in harsh maximum security prisons (McCorkle 1992, 161).

Complete lack of control of one's environment combined with constant fear of violence and punishment shapes the life of most inmates. Admission of vulnerability is dangerous, however, as it might invite exploitation. Inmates tend to develop a "prison mask" and grow an attitude of keeping others at distance, which often results in chronic social debilitation.

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Religious Ways of Coping with Moral Injury and PICS: Prison Conversions

One of the most catching ways of religious response to the hardship of prison life concerns the widespread phenomenon of prison conversions. Everywhere behind bars one may find converts who claim to have found a "new life in Jesus" involving substantial changes in attitudes and behaviors, changes in beliefs and (most importantly) changes in self-understanding and social affiliation. Such conversions from "sinner" to "true believer" are sometimes met with suspicion (are they real or faked?) or cynicism (finding God might be a convenient way to impress parole boards and judges).

Even so, research into cases of jail-cell conversion points out a phenomenon that can very well be understood as an effective way of coping with moral anguish and with the hardships of conviction and prison life (Maruna et al. 2006). To see how conversion can play this role, we need to avoid conceptualizing religious conversion in terms of systematic theological categories, that is in terms of what "counts" as a genuine conversion within particular religious traditions or denominations. And we also need to avoid sociological explanations in which conversion is primarily understood as an adoption (or a change) of religious group membership.

We need to understand religious conversion in terms of the actual experiences, actions, thoughts, desires, and self-expressions of converts. In other words we need to take the hermeneutical perspective of "lived religion," which tries to understand everyday religious expressions and practices from the perspective of the "ordinary" believer (Ammerman 2007; Failing and Heimbrock 1998; Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014; McGuire 2008). From the perspective of lived religion, a religious conversion is understood as related to multivalent, genuine experiences, regardless of the reality of what is experienced and regardless of the way such experiences are categorized according to official religious dogma (Orsi 2016). Lived religion focuses on concrete experiences and practices rooted in their specific and immediate surroundings (Bender 2007).

This means that our concept of religious conversion is nourished by psychological insights which are exclusively based on experiences,

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reported beliefs and actions of the convert. Psychological research based on the perspective of the convert shows that religious conversion is experienced as a spiritual transformation involving an alteration of "destination" understood as that what people construe as most important in their lives and perceive as "sacred" (Pargament 1997). Although such an alteration hardly involves the converts' core personality traits, it may result in life transforming changes in a person's purposes, goals, values, attitudes, beliefs, and experienced identity (Paloutzian et al. 1999). Such changes profoundly affect a person's cognitive, attitudinal, and conative positioning, which explains the radicalness of the transformation (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2013, 403).

Moreover, such a spiritual transformation is nourished and shaped by the self-narrative of the convert, a self-narrative which takes the form of a biographical reconstruction resulting in an altered self-conception (Staples and Mauss 1987). Such self-narratives do not just refer to what the convert claims to have experienced, but more importantly function to construct the convert's actual personal identity. The reinterpretation of one's autobiography not only follows upon a change in subjectivity but at the same time induces such a change (Maruna et al. 2006, 166 ff). This partly explains why it is important for converts to testify about their newly found life and to share their story with others. Such testimony has the function of a "performative discursive practice" of constructing a narrative identity understood as "the effort to make sense of one's life before the audience of the other" (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2013, 400).

The religious element of these processes of transformation comes in when in this self-narrative the relation with God/ the divine/ the transcendent and so on becomes the ultimate source of significance. God's love, God's authority, and God's purpose with the life of the convert provide for the ultimate source of meaning and the highest organizing principle of his life (Mahoney and Pargament 2004, 483). Existence becomes purposeful, the world is experienced as beneficial and one gets to see oneself as a person who merits love and respect, because of one's personal relationship with a power that transcends all the harsh circumstances that used to undermine the prisoners' sense of reality. The narratives about God's plan and God's love nourish the experience of a new "root reality" (Heirich 1977, 674). Such an experience may explain the dramatic

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change of “self-defining” personality functions like identity and life meaning (Emmons and Paloutzian 2003, 394; Paloutzian et al. 1999, 1068).

What exactly makes a religious conversion an effective coping mechanism for prisoners prone to suffer from traumas? Two clusters of coping effects can be distinguished related to the two clusters of negative effects of imprisonment:

1. Shame Management and Self-image

> Central to the stigmatization process experienced by prisoners is the loss of one’s identity as an individual and the transformation into a “type” or a member of larger undifferentiated group: prisoner, offender, criminal, or murderer. (Maruna et al. 2006, 171)

This process of de-individuation is strengthened by the fact that prisoners are often designated by a number instead of by their name. Such a deprivation of identity further destroys prisoners’ self-image, which was shuttered already by the fact that they have committed a crime (or have been accused of a crime), an event that may contradict the taken-for-granted view of oneself, sometimes resulting in terrible feelings of shame and/or guilt. Religious idiom and narratives may then provide for a welcome framework to interpret the experiences that have shuttered one’s life and one’s self-conception. Conversion and the connected form of biographical reconstruction can in this regard be understood as a way of making sense of one’s life so as to restore identity and self-esteem. As reborn Christians prisoners may find meaning in what has happened to them. Their conviction and imprisonment gets to be regarded as purposeful. “It happened for a reason,” because it led to their newly found belief and identity. This understanding helps the convert to restore a positive self-image. Their conversion narrative creates a new religious identity that replaces the label of prisoner and criminal and that imbues the experience of incarceration with purpose and meaning: imprisonment is re-cast as part of a “plan” that God has constructed for the convert (Maruna et al. 2006, 176). Their new religious identity makes it also possible to view themselves as forgiven, without denying their (alleged) crime. Seeing

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oneself as a (forgiven) sinner restores feelings of self-worth because the religious discourse adopted describes all people as sinners in need of forgiveness (Maruna et al. 2006, 178). Self-forgiveness becomes possible once one comes to experience oneself as a person whose sins do not count any longer in God's eyes (though this does not imply a change in the relation with victims).

These changes effectively counter the traumatizing effects of moral injury and incarceration because converts regain a belief that the world is a benevolent place and they are worthy people. Their fate is meaningful because in line with the "will of God."

2. Empowerment

Conversion may secondly be understood as an effective way of empowerment. Many converts come to view themselves as an instrument through which God works. Their self-image is one of a minister sent by God to preach to their fellow prisoners. This "calling" puts them in a sense above the daily concerns of prison life. But what is more: their newly created self-narrative liberates them from the institutional powers that determine their lives and take away every form of self-determination. Converts testify about a new self-understanding in which their fate lies in the hands of God and not in the hands of the prison governor or anonymous bureaucrats like the members of the parole board. Converted prisoners who are convicted to a life sentence with the possibility of parole come to believe that God will decide when it is their time to be released. They feel that the power to judge about their fate is no longer in the hand of human authorities, but that God steers their life with their best interest at heart. This conviction allows converted prisoners a way out of the feelings of powerlessness and dehumanization. They are able to

> rationalize the length of their stay in prison with reference to God's will, work they could do for God while in prison, and various goals that they have been sent to achieve. (Maruna et al. 2006, 179.)

This form of empowerment can also be recognized in the work of the Dutch prison chaplain Arjan Noordhoek:

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> If a detained person says "God is my judge" then I will confirm that. This inmate himself is handling over power, he *gives* power to someone. He says: God may judge me. He points out another authority. In a repressive institute like a prison I always ask inmates who got into trouble: what can you learn from this? what is going on? Such questions help to displace the person from the immediate "now" to a broader perspective. It empowers the prisoners: yes, this is an experience from which I can learn! One step further, and I say: what might be God's purpose with this event? This is the ultimate form of restoring purpose and autonomy: looking at the same event completely differently. (Van Willigenburg 2016)

Conclusion

Crime, conviction and incarceration shatter a person's integrity and identity. It induces shame and alienation, and it forces people to live in circumstances of permanent stress and fear. Even so, such traumatizing experiences may be an unexpected source of positive growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995). This is visible in the self-narratives of jail cell converts. Using a lived religion framework, this chapter highlights how these converts use religious idiom and narratives in order to reconstruct their biography so as to gain a new consciousness of self-worth, purpose, and autonomy. They testify about a newly experienced "root reality" which transforms their attitudes and behaviors, their self-understanding, their beliefs, and their social affiliations. They regain self-respect in spite of feelings of guilt, understanding themselves as redeemed sinners. One interesting topic of follow-up research might concern the question whether there are forms of non-religious transformation that could have the same positive effects.

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