Faith-Based Programs

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Abstract
Faith-based programs are one of the oldest forms of correctional treatment in prisons around the world. In the United States (US), faith-based programming was the original and primary form of treatment. The use of faith-based programming in the US was reduced greatly with the rise of the medical model of inmate rehabilitation in the mid-twentieth century. Recently, however, faith-based programming has experienced revitalization with the Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 Welfare Reform and development of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 2002 (since renamed to the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships). Consequently, faith-based organizations are now allowed to compete for federal grants once reserved exclusively for non-religious organizations. As such, the increased presence and use of faith-based programming in correctional contexts has simultaneously continued a strong tradition and has renewed a long-standing debate in corrections.

Main Text
Introduction
Faith-based programs are arguably the oldest form of programming to exist in the US correctional system. Moreover, faith-based programming is a broad term that is applied to a variety of offender treatment and rehabilitation programs that emphasize some form of religious faith in conjunction with formal and informal religious services. Services that can be offered by faith-based organizations range from a small prayer group to a self-enclosed residential facility within a prison that emphasizes strict lifestyle choices in accordance with religious beliefs. Even though faith-based programming has been a part of the US correctional system since its inception, both the use and emphasis of this form of programming has changed tremendously over the past approximately 200 years.

Faith-based programs originally were meant to address what many viewed as the root issue of crime, being that individuals had committed sinful acts. Since crime was viewed as sin, then the most appropriate way believed to address this issue was through the moral reform of offenders. Moreover, the successful moral reform of offenders could only be achieved through intensive religious, primarily Christian, instruction. As such, faith-based programming was viewed and subsequently utilized as a way to address the perceived moral failings of offenders, and thus helping offenders become productive members of society after release. However, with the increased use and emphasis of science in corrections - as opposed to religion - the presence/use of faith-based programming underwent and continues to undergo substantial changes in the approximately 200-year history of the US correctional system.
The connection between religion and corrections within the US dates back to the 18th century. Originating in a time where religion was the primary way for explaining and attempting to address many societal behaviors, the application of religion to criminal behavior was a natural extension of this belief. However, this viewpoint of religion being a primary explanation for and a way to control behavior was not uniquely American, as it was a sentiment shared by other Western nations at the time. For example, Jonas Hanaway, an Englishman, published a book entitled *Solitude in Imprisonment* in 1776. In this work he called for the religious conversion of prisoners while incarcerated (Burkhead 2007). Although these calls were not exclusively American, the timing of such calls for the religious/moral reform of prisoners came at a crucial point in American history. Specifically, these calls came about during the ideological conception and formation of the American correctional system, thus becoming an integral part of its identity.

Even though many religious groups from various faith traditions were involved in the early stages of the American correctional system, it is the religious group known as the Quakers that arguably made the most substantial impact on the formation of the American correctional system. In particular, the Quakers were influential in the formation of the first penitentiaries. The root word of penitentiary, *penitence*, even refers to individuals *repenting* from their sins. Moreover, the first penitentiaries emphasized the practice of solitary confinement where inmates were housed by themselves for the majority of the day, often not being allowed to speak to anyone except the guards. Additionally, individuals were provided Bibles where they were expected to spend their time reading/reflecting on their behavior that led to their incarceration. Chaplains were also employed within these institutions to serve as moral authorities to provide guidance to inmates throughout their *anticipated* conversion. As such, individuals were sent to penitentiaries with the expectation that they would repent from their sins, thus turning away from a life of sin and crime. From this point forward, religious underpinnings would persistently become tied to the idea and various methods of inmate rehabilitation.

Although religion was viewed as an essential component for “turning away” from a life of crime in early American corrections, this viewpoint and practice decreased substantially from approximately the 1850s to the 1950s. During this time, religious explanations that were once used to explain/control individual behavior were being replaced with scientific explanations. One direct manifestation of the use of scientific explanations to explain and subsequently treat criminal behavior was the rise of the medical model for inmate rehabilitation. In essence, this model for offender rehabilitation was that criminal behavior could be medically diagnosed. Moreover, once a particular *illness* was diagnosed, then it could be *cured*. As such, the use of faith-based programming for the same purpose largely fell out of favor. Additionally, a combination of the “Get Tough on Crime” movement, the “Nothing Works” doctrine, and landmark court cases, such as *Cooper v. Pate* (1964) that dealt with inmate religious rights, led correctional administrators to be even more cautious of the use of officially endorsed faith-based programming for fear of potential litigation. Consequently, the role of religion and faith-based programming inside and outside of prison was largely minimized until near the end of the 20th century.
Late 20th Century Resurgence

With major changes to the correctional landscape that began to take form from the 1950s to the 1980s, the role of faith-based programming in modern corrections was in question. However, the general attitude by politicians began changing in the late 1990s. After the relatively brief usage of the medial model for inmate rehabilitation, politicians - primarily conservative - argued for a return to religion-oriented programs to rehabilitate inmates. Calls for such change increased even more with the total amount of individuals incarcerated the US reaching its highest point ever.

Although sentiment among primarily conservative politicians was one of the key driving forces behind the call to return to religious-based offender programming, the catalyst for this change was the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act championed by President Bill Clinton in 1996. It was the passage of this act that eventually opened the door for substantial funding opportunities not previously available for faith-based organizations, thus fueling the resurgence of faith-based programming in correctional contexts (Dodson, Cabage, and Klenowski 2011). The primary intent of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 was to be an overhaul the US welfare system. Although seemingly unrelated, this piece of legislation contained a provision entitled Charitable Choice that had three overall goals (Dodson, Cabage, and Klenowski 2011). The first goal was to embolden states to increase the use and involvement of both community-based and faith-based organizations to assist with welfare-related issues. The second goal was to ensure that if a faith-based organization did accept any form of government funding, to assure that their integrity would be protected. The third goal was to defend the religious rights of those who would pursue such assistance from any faith-based organization. In essence, this introduced the possibility for direct cooperation between the federal government to officially work in conjunction with a faith-based organization for correctional purposes.

Although the groundwork was laid for potential partnerships and funding opportunities with this legislation, it was not until the election of President George W. Bush when these potential opportunities would gain even more momentum. Building from his successful efforts to expand faith-based programming for offenders while governor of Texas, President George W. Bush established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 2001. The creation of this office further cemented the potential for official cooperation between the federal government and faith-based organizations in the provision of social services, including services to those currently or previously incarcerated. In total, approximately $28 billion in funding was now potentially available for faith-based organizations. Consequently, this created the groundwork for cooperation between the government and faith-based organizations that some argued blurred the lines between the separation of church and state.

Some critics of these efforts believed that the election of President Barack Obama would bring an end to the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. However, in 2009, President Obama officially changed the name of this office to the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. As such, this ensured the continued ability of faith-based organizations to apply for and potentially receive government grant monies for the foreseeable future. Some critics have voiced concern over such a relationship between the
government and faith-based organizations, especially with the diversity that exists within many faith-based programs.

Types of Faith-Based Programs

A program may be considered faith-based if it emphasizes some element of religious faith in its programming, goals, and/or objectives. As such, the term faith-based can apply to a multitude of different offender programs. These programs can range from a Christian Bible study to a drug rehabilitation program that emphasizes belief in a generic higher power. Moreover, faith-based programs in some states, such as Texas, are allowed to operate as a self-contained unit within a larger institution with dedicated space, staff, and other key resources.

Faith-based programs include, but are not limited to, the following forms: Bible studies, devotional groups, support groups, substance abuse treatment, life skills, vocational skills, and halfway houses. These programs can operate both inside and outside of the prison setting for offenders under some form of formal supervision in the community. Nearly all prisons are believed to offer some form of religious worship services due to potential legal issues from not providing such services and/or opportunities for inmates to practice their faith. Moreover, fully 93% of all prisons in the US are estimated to offer prayer groups.

Since the 1970s, there have been several notable faith-based programs that operate both inside and outside of prisons in the US. Perhaps the most well-known faith-based program is Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM). Founded in 1976 by Charles Colson, former politician and inmate during the Nixon-era Watergate scandal, PFM has since expanded to over 100 countries. Additionally, PFM is estimated to have a program in approximately 1,300 facilities throughout the US, and has approximately 22,000 volunteers. Furthermore, Prison Fellowship focuses on inmates by emphasizing Christian religious principles that inmates can use to purportedly better their lives inside and outside of prison. Additionally, PFM focuses on connecting inmates with outside churches to assist with their transition into free society upon release.

Reasons for Participation

One area of interest for researchers who have examined faith-based programming in correctional contexts is why inmates may be inclined to participate in such programming opportunities. Through examination of this issue, there have been a number of reasons identified for why offenders may choose to participate in such programming. Generally, these reasons fall into two camps: those that hold a more positive view and those that assume a more skeptical view for inmate participation. For a more positive outlook, such identified reasons include finding meaning in one’s life, obtaining peace of mind, experiencing some form of personal change, and/or having greater self-esteem (Kwon et al. 2010). For a more critical outlook, identified reasons include obtaining access to prison resources that otherwise would be unavailable, interaction with program volunteers, and protection from fellow inmates (Kwon et al. 2010).

Effectiveness of Faith-Based Programs

Perhaps one of the biggest questions and controversies surrounding the use of faith-based programs in a correctional context is the overall effectiveness of such programs. For the most part, effectiveness has been defined as the ability of faith-based programs to reduce offender
recidivism. Although some faith-based organizations have argued that recidivism is not a primary goal, from a correctional administrator’s standpoint the same standards applied to other forms of offender programming are often applied to faith-based programs.

Even though faith-based programs have existed for nearly 200 years, the empirical validity of such programs has been largely absent. One of the main reasons for this lack of empirical validity is the difficulty of finding an adequate control group of offenders in which to compare those who participated in a faith-based program. Moreover, the assessments that have been done on faith-based programs typically suffer from substantial methodological issues that bring into question any validity of findings, regardless of whether such findings are in support of or opposition to a program’s overall effectiveness (Camp et al. 2006).

Although research examining the effectiveness of faith-based programs remains scant, several studies have attempted to examine the overall effectiveness of select faith-based programs. Mostly, these evaluations have produced mixed results. Moreover, such evaluations typically center on the ability of inmate religiosity to impact inmate behavior while incarcerated and their likelihood to recidivate once released with religiosity loosely referring to the religious beliefs and practices of inmates.

In one of the first studies to examine the relationship between religiosity and an inmate’s behavior while incarcerated, Johnson (1987) found that inmates’ religiosity and other key measures were not significant indicators of their reduced likelihood of receiving a disciplinary infraction. This finding was later supported in a study by Johnson, Larson, and Pitts (1997) when they evaluated a Prison Fellowship-related program that participation was not indicative of a reduction in total disciplinary infractions. However, Clear et al. (1992) found religiosity does significantly predict the likelihood of coping effectively with being incarcerated and a reduction in the overall proclivity for receiving disciplinary infractions. Moreover, Kerley, Allison, and Graham (2006) found that religiosity reduced inmates’ likelihood of getting into a confrontation while incarcerated by approximately 70%.

When examining the effect that program participation has on the likelihood of offender recidivism once released from prison, research has also produced mixed results. One example of a study examining this relationship is by Young et al. (1995). The authors studied the recidivism rates of federal offenders who were trained as volunteer ministers while incarcerated. They found that a group of program participants had a significantly lower overall likelihood of recidivism when compared to a control group when using an eight to 14-year follow-up period. Another study examining this issue by Camp and colleagues (2006) found that faith-based programs reduced recidivism rates only for inmates with the highest levels of involvement.

A third example of a study examining this relationship is by Johnson (2004), who expanded upon previous studies that assessed offender recidivism of former participants of a Prison Fellowship Ministries program. Johnson (2004) found that when using an eight-year measure for recidivism, there was no difference between participants and non-participants of the program that had been touted in prior research as having worked. Moreover, he found that the greater participation typically increased an offender’s chances for successful reentry; however, the effect tends to last only for two to three years immediately following their release from
incarceration. Regardless of whether faith-based programs are effective in reducing recidivism, some scholars suggest that such programming needs should continue because of their role in promoting what are widely perceived to be pro-social behaviors.

Future of Faith-Based Programs

Although faith-based programs saw a rapid decline in overall use through most of the 20th century, this trend began to reverse towards the close of the century. Now in the 21st century, the future for faith-based programming in correctional contexts appears to be strong. With the continuation of the White House Office for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships in the US, for example, faith-based organizations have the ability to compete for billions of dollars in grant monies. Moreover, the passage of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (2000) - that further protects inmates’ rights to religious practice while incarcerated - ensures the presence of such programming in some form within US prisons. This may especially be the case with a substantial portion of such programming being operated at little-to-no cost to the institution, as local religious groups typically volunteer to organize and carry out such programs.

SEE ALSO: Buddhism in prisons, Catholicism in prisons, Chaplains, Judaism in prison,

References


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Further Reading


Author Mini-Biography
Andrew S. Denney is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at the University of West Florida. His research focuses on institutional corrections, offender re-entry, faith-based programming, and sexual deviance. His most recent publications have appeared in *Criminal Justice Review, Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice and Criminology*, and *International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*. 