



'Because you've got faith it doesn't mean that you've got wings on your back': a qualitative analysis of the accounts of Christian prisoners serving time for a sexual offence

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Abstract

Religious beliefs have been variously promulgated as both protective and risk factors for sexual reoffending. Moreover, therapists working with religious prisoners struggle with unravelling cognitive distortions embedded within religious views, with concerns about accusations of prejudice salient in their mindset. This paper presents a novel contribution to research by combining the qualitative analysis of the accounts offered by individuals (n=12) convicted of sexual offences who describe themselves as Christians. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This paper focuses on two superordinate themes: (i) The God Effect and (ii) The Shadow Side of Religion. Implications of this research are discussed with reference to the assessment of dynamic risk and protective factors with religious individuals who have been convicted of a sexual offence.

Keywords: Sexual offending, sexual offence, qualitative, Christian, IPA, religious; risk factors

Introduction

Research pertaining to religion and sexual offending has, to date, largely focused on offences committed by religious authority figures, such as priests (Eshuys & Smallbone, 2006). This is an important area for investigation, particularly in considering prevention work and developing protocols to minimise opportunities for abuse. Thus, this exploration of sexual offending by authority figures of religious institutions is important in prevention work but tells us relatively little about the more general impact of religion on sexual offending. This paper presents a different focus, that of 'ordinary' religious individuals who have been convicted of sexual offences, and focuses on how religious beliefs, as seen through the eyes of offenders, might either buffer or reduce desistance from offending in the form of contributing to either dynamic and/or protective risk factors.

In the UK, approximately 48 percent of prisoners classify themselves as Christian (Field, 2010); this is set against the 59 percent of people in England and Wales who classified themselves as Christian in the UK 2011 Census (ONS, 2013). Research on religiosity within the general population typically shows a positive effect, being associated with enhanced mood (Hicks & King, 2008), lower rates of substance abuse, depression and suicide (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013), an increased ability to cope with stressful events (Gall, Malette & Guirguis-Younger, 2011), and increased life expectancy (George, Ellison & Larson, 2002).

Research regarding the impact or role of religion within offending populations is somewhat conflicting. Research has demonstrated a relationship between being religious in prison and having a lower frequency and severity of depressive symptoms (Eytan, 2011), ability to cope with feelings of guilt, imprisonment and social rejection (Aydin, Fischer & Frey 2010), improved adjustment to the prison environment (Clear & Sumter, 2002) and the capacity to establish less stressful and more

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3 appropriate inmate relationships (Clear, Hardyman, Stout, Lucken, & Dammer, 2000).
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6 For those already imprisoned, religiosity has also been demonstrated as reducing general
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8 prison deviance, including violence and arguments (Kerley, Copes, Tewksbury & Dabney, 2010)
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10 and the number of imposed disciplinary sanctions (O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002). Furthermore,
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12 there is large body of research evidence outlining the deterrent effect that religion has (Baier &
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14 Wright, 2001; Johnson & Jang, 2011) thus reducing involvement in criminal behaviour. For those
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16 who are successful at desisting from crime, religiosity is often attributed as a source of their
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18 desistance (Hallett & McCoy, 2014). Whilst there is scepticism within the media apropos prisoners
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20 'finding' religion as a means of faking good, religion may provide a protective factor for some: in a
21
22 review of the literature surrounding the relationship between religion and crime, Johnson and Jang
23
24 (2011) concluded that, of the 270 studies they reviewed, approximately ninety percent reported a
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26 beneficent impact of religion on crime/delinquency, supporting the argument that religiosity can be
27
28 a protective factor.
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34 However, a plethora of studies have challenged the notion that religious association serves
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36 to deter individuals from offending. In particular, some have delineated criminogenic effects of
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38 religion, arguing that it can contribute to cognitive distortions that facilitate crime (Knabb, Welsh
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40 & Graham-Howard, 2012; Saradjian & Nobus, 2003). In their study of serious street crime
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42 offenders, Topalli, Brezina and Bernhardt (2012) reported a criminogenic effect of religiosity,
43
44 highlighting that religion can be used in selfish and self-serving ways by offenders who 'exploit the
45
46 absolvitory tenets of religious doctrine' (p. 49). Essentially, these offenders were found to interpret
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48 the religious doctrine in such a way that allowed them to justify their offending, with the authors
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50 arguing that this not only allowed but could maintain and encourage offending (ibid.).
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55 Whilst there is a growing body of research concerning the effect (criminogenic or positive)
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3 of religion on offending, and a substantive body of research on the impact of religion on people
4 generally, there is currently paucity of research focusing on sexual offending and religion. The
5 extant literature predominantly comprises studies of prevalence, or are focused on catholic priests
6 and abuse (Langevin, Curnoe & Bain, 2000; Francis, & Turner, 1995; Nolan, 2001; Plante, 2003),
7 or on professionals (including priests) who sexually abuse others (Sullivan & Beech, 2002). A
8 promising stream of research has been published by Kewley and colleagues (Kewley, Larkin,
9 Harkins & Beech, 2017; Kewley, Beech & Harkins, 2015) which has contributed to our
10 understanding of the experiences of religious individuals who have committed sexual offences as
11 they seek to re-engage with faith communities following release from prison.
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24 This research sets out to explore the role of religiosity in the lives of lay Christian
25 individuals who are currently serving a prison sentence for sexual crime. The study considers how
26 their individual experiences and understanding of their religious beliefs may be posited as
27 contributing to, or reducing, their dynamic risk, together with how their interpretations of their
28 personal religious beliefs impact upon attitudes to treatment.
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38 **Method**

39 *Participants*

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41 The participants comprised 12 adult male individuals convicted for sexual offending who were
42 currently serving sentences at a UK treatment prison. Participant information is detailed in Table
43 one; participants were aged between 40 and 72, predominantly White British (one White Other);
44 they comprised a mixture of Christian denominations, and had committed a range of sexual
45 offences (predominantly child sexual offences).
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3 Table 1: Participant information
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19 *Data Collection*
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21 Access to participants was granted by a UK prison following ethical approval by HMPPS and a UK
22 University. Information about the research was advertised in the prison chaplaincy department
23 (through posters and leaflets), and the chaplaincy staff highlighted the research to individuals
24 attending Christian services. Information sheets were sent out to any prisoner who expressed an
25 interest in participating explaining the nature of the research and detailing the ethical protocols.
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35 All participants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis by one of the three authors (one White
36 Pagan female, one white atheist female, one white atheist male) in a dedicated room within the
37 prison, offering a private and respectful environment for participants to ‘tell their stories’
38 (Waldram, 2007, p.963). Each interview was recorded on a passcode-protected dictaphone and
39 transcribed verbatim.
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49 The sample size (n=12) is appropriate for qualitative research where intensive rather than extensive
50 analysis is prioritised across a range of methodologies (e.g. Smith, 2015). In terms of interpretative
51 phenomenological analysis and the data analytical approach used in this research, the sample size
52 is large though in accordance with precedents (see Blagden, Winder, Thorne & Gregson, 2011).
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Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of between 1.5-3 hours. The interview schedule was developed through consultation with colleagues and structured into five broad sections:

[1] Questions about faith, their beliefs and the values they associated with their religion

[2] Self, home and family environment, personal information (such as occupation and age)

[3] Religious beliefs in relation to their offending

[4] Treatment

[5] Future plans, goals, and coping outside prison

Analysis

The research utilised the analytic method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) since, as Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005) promulgate: 'participants are recruited because of their expertise in the phenomenon being explored' (p.20). IPA examines how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2008), and its central concern is with the subjective experiences of individuals (Eatough & Smith, 2006). IPA is a double hermeneutic method where participants seek to explain and interpret their own experiences, and researchers subsequently re-interpret participants' interpretations of their accounts of these experiences.

Analysis was guided by previous precedents (see Smith, 2015) and entailed: Stage one – listening to the audio recordings of each interview several times in order to recall the atmosphere of each interview (particularly where different members of the research team conducted interviews). At this point notes, reflections and thoughts were noted. Stage two involved the detailed reading,

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2
3 re-reading and analysis of each transcript individually, with comments and observations recorded
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5 on content, language used, metaphors and emotional reactions of the participant. Stage three
6
7 involved the re-reading of each transcript, with further notes added linking concepts and emerging
8
9 themes intra and inter-transcripts. In stage four, those themes that emerged in at least half of the
10
11 transcripts were selected (see Dickson, Knussen & Flowers, 2008). Emergent themes were
12
13 subsequently clustered under superordinate headings. With such a comparatively large sample for
14
15 IPA, the researchers endeavoured to counterbalance the capture and presentation of rich
16
17 idiographic data against the extraction and reporting of recurring themes across the dataset. During
18
19 this data organisation process, the researchers engaged in a continual iterative process, moving
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21 between themes and transcripts to ensure that the themes selected were representative of
22
23 participants' accounts and that extracts highlighted the essence of the theme and the lived
24
25 experience of an individual.
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33 *Results*

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35 Table two below presents two of the four superordinate themes derived from the data, focusing on
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37 those themes which resonate most strongly with either risk or protective factors in desisting from
38
39 reoffending (the remaining two themes consider redemption and transitions and are the focus of a
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41 subsequent paper).
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47 Table 2: Superordinate and subordinate themes from the data set.
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51 INSERT TABLE 2
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56 **Superordinate theme 1: The God Effect**

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3 This superordinate theme encompassed participants' reflections on how feeling close to God had
4 helped them, both as individuals, but also in their behaviours and interactions with others. In
5 subordinate theme 1.1 (Religion as Coping Mechanism), this was through providing support, and
6 helped them to cope, providing a sense of peace and someone who would listen to them at any time
7 of the day or night. In subordinate theme 1.2 (Leading a Good Life), this was by encouraging them
8 to be more altruistic and by giving them 'better' values to live up to; participants also spoke about
9 what they now gave back as they tried to live as Christian citizens. In the third subordinate theme
10 (1.3 Therapeutic Effect of Chapel, Chaplaincy and Faith), participants also identified a range of
11 benefits that they experienced as a direct result of the chapel, chaplains and their individual faith.
12 Participants spoke about how finding a place in which they did not feel judged was helpful to them
13 as they struggled with their new 'broken' identity of 'sex offender'. Religion may provide solace
14 by helping a prisoner to make 'consistent sense of his situation' (Goffman, 1963;1968, p.133). The
15 notion of mending something that is broken allows the stigmatised individual (prisoner who has
16 been convicted of a sexual offence) to attach their personal story to an archetypal script, where the
17 focus is not on the nature of their stigmatisation but of mending that which has been broken. This
18 broken / fixed script is also present in treatment programme narratives, such as the 'Becoming New
19 Me' treatment programme for individuals with an intellectual disability who have been convicted
20 of a sexual offence.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 **1.1: God as Coping Mechanism**

48
49 Participants spoke about God as a person in their mind that they could talk to at any time of the day
50 or night, who would give them emotional support and, sometimes, serendipitously through others,
51 provide practical support. Having God was better than other types of support:
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56 Extract 1

1
2
3 I think those people who have got religion, have got a hook that they can hook on to, er,
4 which is a hook that's not going to let them down... because it's there, it's not something
5
6 that, you know, the pubs shuts, the church is shut, but God doesn't shut (P1)
7
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11
12 God is envisaged as someone who is always there to listen to them, who would not reject them
13
14 regardless of what they had done, someone they could trust and who personally cared about them
15
16 and their lives. This participant's extract highlights a theme from all participants that the support
17
18 from God was not restrictive or limited, but was there when they needed it.
19
20

21 Extract 2

22
23 And there's a, that there's a, often people talk about looking back and you see one set of
24
25 footprints in the sand, and when you look back there should be two. But if there's one, when
26
27 there's been occasions like when I dipped, there's been one step and that means the lord's
28
29 been carrying you. That's how we think about it (P8)
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35 God was perceived as a resource they could draw upon in a myriad of ways, who was there as a
36
37 source of comfort and strength in difficult times, at times where other coping resources may have
38
39 been depleted, who would help them cope with the struggles they had, be they daily irritations or
40
41 significant problems in their lives.
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46 Extract 3

47
48 And the, the bottom line is, as far as the coping is concerned, that comfort blanket as I
49
50 mentioned earlier, is there, because I know, that God's there (P1)
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54

55 Extract 4

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2
3 I didn't get much love or anything from me (inaudible) father and er, but then I felt I was
4 getting the love and the wanted feeling from my heavenly father and this is why I think I've
5 clinged to my faith. Because I get this love and the warmth I've been seeking from from the
6 heavenly father (P9)
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14 In extract four, the love and warmth missing from his father was achieved through his faith, here
15 the participant explicitly talks about the concept of God as an attachment figure, an idea that has
16 been proposed by Kirkpatrick (1992; 1999) and Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) who set out to
17 integrate the psychology of religion with attachment theory. Cicirelli (2004) examined religion and
18 attachment but focused on elderly people (participants were aged 70-97); Cicirelli writes 'there are
19 reasons for believing that attachment to God may have special applicability to older adults' (p.371).
20 Indeed, his findings demonstrated that God took on the role of as a substitute attachment for some
21 elderly participants- in particular, those who had lost other attachment figures. Whilst Cicirelli
22 writes about elderly non-offending individuals, **there is a clear connection between individuals**
23 **who have committed a sexual offence** (who are likely to be older than typical offenders) but also
24 because they mirror Cicirelli's participants who had had to face 'accumulating losses in their lives'
25 (Cicirelli, 2004, p.383). It is arguable that building a strong relationship with God may contribute
26 to addressing some deficits in having emotionally intimate relationships which are an established
27 risk factor (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004). Religion/faith was seen by some as a source of
28 strength, a resource which provided comfort and support throughout every aspect of their daily
29 lives, including treatment.
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51 Extract 5

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53 I: So what role would you say that faith played in how you were in your programmes

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56 P: Settles me down
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3 I: Okay
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5 P: I've had um steps gone through where I've had to have a meeting with somebody and
6
7 I've dreaded it I've absolutely dreaded them coming up and I've said a prayer before I go to
8
9 the meeting in my cell my bible for some unknown reason there's nothing to worry about so
10
11 somebody's helping me somewhere (P11)
12
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17 That religion could have a positive role in helping someone engage with treatment has been cited as
18
19 something that may not occur to therapists. Wakame (2014) described how therapists working with
20
21 people who have committed sexual offences reported ambivalence and difficulties when working
22
23 with prisoners of faith. The therapists were concerned they may contravene principles of diversity
24
25 and equality, and so allowed offence supportive beliefs to continue, underpinned by a context of
26
27 religious illiteracy (see Wakame, 2014). The importance of good communications between the
28
29 chaplaincy team and the psychologists offering treatment is imperative to improve religious
30
31 literacy (Moore, 2007) and to ensure prisoners, therapists and chaplains all work together to dispel
32
33 offence-supportive beliefs that are misattributed to faith teachings.
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40 **1.2: Leading a Good Life**

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42 Participants spoke about what they now did in their lives to try to live up to the ideal they envisaged
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44 God wanted them to, and this led to them volunteering and helping others in numerous ways. This
45
46 took the form of as part of a formal group, such as the Insider scheme (where experienced prisoners
47
48 help new arrivals into the prison to settle; see Boothby, 2011), the Samaritans' Listener scheme
49
50 (Samaritans, 2014), a local bereavement group or the Toe-to-Toe scheme (where prisoners help
51
52 other prisoners learn to read; see Shannon Trust, 2005), or as individuals helping others.
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Extract 6

y'know that same wanting to make sure people are okay fits in with when I was in chapel
y'know people that came to me with problems you would talk it through with them you
would help them and y'know I suppose the caring side does come through love your
neighbour as yourself (P4)

Extract 7

I think because you've got faith it doesn't mean that you've got wings on your back y'know
I think a lot of people they seem to accuse Christians of being the ultimate perfect human
being and sadly we're not y'know we're still we're still very much the same people we
were before we come into faith but uh but with the faith you have a bit more of the correct
guidance in life and uh life in general how one should be (P10)

Participants asserted that they were now 'better' people as a consequence of their relationship with
God, and because they were committed to following God's teaching with its Christian values of
agape (love), koinonia (community), compassion, service and self-sacrifice (see Diocese of Ely,
n.d.).

Participants declared how committed they were to being honest with themselves and, of course,
with God. They understood that God to be omniscient so there was nothing they could hide from
him; participants affirmed how important it was to them not to let God down. The participants'
narratives all related how the good values of Christianity, as espoused by God, meant that the
closer they were to God, the better they were as people in the sense that they felt a deep sense of
satisfaction at being close to God and wanted to do things that pleased and kept them close to God.

Extract 8

which I'm quite happy and satisfied that I'm not gonna go down that road again what I went down because it doesn't fit with my Christian values and I know that is isn't right on many levels but Christianity reinforces that for me because I don't want that or anything to come in between me and God (P4)

Religion as a fulfilment of human needs can be seen in light of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs at the level of self-actualisation (O'Connor & Yballe, 2007), but it can also be explained in terms of one of the prominent and significant theories of desistance from crime, Ward's (2002) Good Lives Model. Ward, Mann and Gannon (2007) write about how the dominant theories of risk management and relapse prevention ignore 'disregard the crucial importance of human needs' (p.88) and if we take the position that, for some people, religion is a primary human need, then exploring how this helps an individual in terms of developing protective factors, is an important facet of their desistance journey. Individuals aspiring to a lifestyle with Christian values might be more likely to elude the negative social influences which have been linked to increased recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2007).

Extract 9

I've kind of, strengthened my faith since I've been in here erm, it's always been there but I've I've reaffirmed it if you like, and strengthened it while I'm in here and erm, my faith has given me the determination that erm, to lead a good life when I leave and again, I, I hope I'll be able to help other people (P8)

Extract 10

y'know believing in Jesus to me is all about caring for other people and y'know and

1
2
3 not wanting to hurt them or anything like that and I take that on now it it's I'm afraid to
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5 commit offences (P5)
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10 The Christian values participants now espoused, and the relationship they now had with God,
11 allowed some of them to talk about how their religion would be a factor in preventing them
12 reoffending. It would be foolish and naive to suggest that just because people had found (or
13 rediscovered) God, none of them would reoffend; however, the importance of the relationship
14 between participants and God, the positive role model values that the religion gives as outlined in
15 the following 'For Christians, agape is the key Christian value—it lies at the root of all other
16 values. It means respect, affection, benevolence, goodwill and concern for the welfare of the one
17 loved. It is selfless, and means putting others first before oneself' (Diocese of Ely, n.d., p.6) and
18 the support that faith gives participants would suggest that it may function as a protective factor for
19 committed individuals. Indeed, the narratives that participants espoused about leading good lives
20 through God also has key links to desistance-based narratives. Thus, allowing offenders to portray
21 "good selves" can lead to enacting or "living" those roles as people tend to act in line with the
22 stories they present about themselves (Blagden, Winder & Hames, 2016; Friestad, 2012;
23 McAdams & McClean, 2013). The Christian principle of benevolence and helping others meant
24 that many participants were in peer support roles, which in and of itself may assist with the
25 desistance process. Peer-support roles have been found to assist with desistance-based narratives
26 and contribute to self-determination and "active citizenship" (Perrin, Blagden, Winder & Dillon,
27 2017; Perrin & Blagden, 2014).
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54 **1.3: Therapeutic Effects of Chapel, Chaplaincy and Faith**

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56 Participants described a therapeutic effect of being in the chapel, talking to chaplains and in their
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3 faith. The chapel was seen somewhere where they could feel 'normal' and rid themselves of the
4
5 master trait of sex offender (Goffman, 1963; 2009). It was not all about their offending, but they
6
7 could lose themselves in the services and be a part of a community which felt separate to the prison
8
9 system.
10

11
12 Extract 11
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14 You're there for a different reason, not because you're in prison, but you're there for your
15
16 faith and for God (P6)
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21
22 Extract 12
23

24 When I get in that chapel, I'm not longer in prison. It feels, I'm out of the prison system in a
25
26 way and erm I'm with me lord and feel so peaceful and calm. And it helps me to get
27
28 through, through the rest of the week, when I go at weekends (P9)
29
30
31
32

33 Extract 11 and 12 highlight how being in chapel allows them to escape or be a part of something
34
35 which is separate from the prison system, because they are there due to their faith rather than their
36
37 offending behaviour. These extracts link to personal agency and self-determination as it is an
38
39 activity they want to do and is meaningful to them, which is important as "purposeful activity" in
40
41 prisons can enable offenders to make positive contributions toward their own rehabilitation
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43 (Blagden, Perrin, Smith, Gleeson, & Gillies, 2017). Participants spoke of being in the chapel as like
44
45 being 'outside' the prison, with the chapel painted as a place of calm and where they could find
46
47 peace. A broad body of literature highlights the importance of prisoners being able to distance
48
49 themselves from simply being a 'prisoner', as it enables them to build hope and strengthens their
50
51 ability to change (Maruna & King, 2009; Perrin & Blagden, 2014; Vaughan, 2007).
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56 Extract 13
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3 Oh wow. It gives me a sense of peace, erm I I I just so look forward to once a week going to
4 chapel. It's it's my highlight of the week It really is. You know and it it just, its peace, erm,
5 sense of, harmony, you know, happiness, stress free, er and it gets you through the week
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9
10 you know (P7)
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15 Extract 14

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17 Even though I was on a VP [Vulnerable Prisoner] wing, you know so your still sort of
18 trying to hide things out the way and everything so, especially going to the chapel there, it
19 was an element of relief, you being away from everybody that wanted to know it was a bit
20 of a break from the wings, the judgmentalness and things like that. (P6)
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28 One of the dominant discourses was that the chapel was a place of refuge from the rest of the prison
29 and, in particular, somewhere where they did not feel judged. It was seen as a place where they
30 could be themselves without feeling judged by others.
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34
35 Extracts 15

36
37 The chaplaincy they don't judge you for what you've done (P6)

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39 And even if you want to talk to someone, you've always got that someone to talk to and
40 they always make you feel better about yourself and they don't put you down, they don't
41 judge ya, you know things like that (P7)
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49 Thus a place where they could start to be the 'new me', and this was seen as more fair.
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51
52 Extracts 16

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54 Only judging me for who I am (P1)

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56 Only judging me for who I am as a person and not what I've done in the past (P6)
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5 Therapeutic effects of their faith were also identified in helping participants regulate their emotions
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7 (such as anger, frustration and irritation) and manage these negative emotions, as well as helping
8
9 them to cope better with anxieties and stress.
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14
15 Extract 17

16
17 Strangely better than I thought, I've come off programmes tearful gone back to the wing not
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19 liking fac-facilitators probably not um liking some group members said a prayer and asked
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21 for forgiveness for disrupting them...reflected on during the night on what upset me on the
22
23 programme and prayer the next morning then I was completely fine again... So that sort of
24
25 thing (P11)
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31 Ward and Gannon (2006), writing about the Good Lives Model, articulate two neurobiological
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33 processes that may be affected, contributing to an individual's vulnerability to (for some people)
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35 sexual offending: one of these is problems with a functional system working (and the example they
36
37 give is an excess of stress hormones such as cortisol giving rise to impulsive and uncontrolled
38
39 behaviour) and where practices (such as prayer, mindfulness or other similar anxiety-reducing
40
41 behaviours) work to address such problems, and thereby contribute a genuine therapeutic effect to
42
43 the individual.
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49 The community aspect of the chapel and their faith was also evident in participants' discourse, and
50
51 feelings of belonging and friendship were fostered by shared acts of worship.
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54
55 Extract 18

56
57 Erm and one of the most ones is er, is the value of, of friendship erm, people that go to the
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2
3 chapel and that and talk to them and, and one thing another. I feel that's very beneficial it's,
4
5 it's a value that I treasure, this friendship (P9)
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10 This last aspect of the therapeutic effects of religion could be a strong protective factor in
11 someone's treatment; however, the alternate side of this is discussed in subordinate theme 2.3
12 (Losing my religion). Belonging to the church community, not feeling judged and being able to
13 monetarily distance themselves from 'prisoner' has clear links with protective factors. Research by
14 Farmer, Beech and Ward (2012) found that persons with sexual crime convictions who had
15 desisted felt a sense of belonging and a place in a social group/network, whereas the active
16 offenders described themselves as socially alienated or isolated. Given that many individuals who
17 have committed sexual offences experience isolation in prison (see van Den Berg et al, 2015) the
18 Chaplaincy and being part of the community can help bolster protective factors.
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32 **The role of chaplains is unusual in that, whilst they are part of the prison staff, they hold this**
33 **personal connection to prisoners.** Sutherland (2010) writes about the role and function of chaplains,
34 identifying their 'use of self' (p.3), in which 'the chaplain allows another's experience to generate a
35 deep personal impact that evokes their own. It encourages them to follow the other's articulation of
36 need' (p.3). However, this connection to prisoners of their faith may also leave them seen (by other
37 prison staff) as vulnerable links when it comes to maintaining professional boundaries.
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45 **Superordinate theme 2: The Shadow Side**

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47 This theme recounts challenges that arose in connection with participants' religious beliefs/faith. It
48 includes subordinate themes on offence supportive narratives (2.1: Risky Scripts), a theme on the
49 less helpful or useful side of religion where individuals are competitive or judgmental towards each
50 other (2.2: Holier than Thou) and the potential escalation to risk when a participant's rosy view of
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3 religion did not turn out the way it was expected to (2.3: Losing my Religion).
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7 8 **2.1: Risky Scripts** 9

10 This theme draws upon scripts articulated by participants in which their faith served to underplay
11 their personal accountability, or future risk. There seemed a 'darker' side to religion in that 'God'
12 was used in some participants' narratives to rationalise and justify their offending behaviour.
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15 Whilst this concept has typically been referred to as the use of 'cognitive distortions', and has been
16 used variously to describe individuals justifying their behaviours or attitudes (Abel et al., 1989),
17 facilitating the creation of an 'excuse syntax' (Pollock & Hashmall, 1991), as a mode of
18 defensiveness (Rogers & Dickey, 1991), rationalising their behaviours (Neidigh & Krop, 1992) or
19 denying it entirely (Blagden et al., 2011), there is argument as to whether this is done prospectively
20 or retrospectively (see Maruna & Mann, 2006) and indeed how useful as a concept. Ward and
21 Casey (2010) suggest use of the term incorrect or deviant cognitive practices as this sets out the
22 utility of these attitudes to the individuals. However, Ó Ciardha and Gannon (2011) prefer the use
23 of the phrase etiological cognitions to denote facets of cognition that have a contributory role in
24 offending and this seems most suitable here, as highlighted by the extract below.
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39 Extract 19 40

41 you know I'm doing this work for the church, for God, then, he is allowing me into this
42 situation erm you know it must be ok...it seemed as though it was alright because God was
43 letting it happen erm I would pray afterwards that I I hadn't done anythi...any harm and
44 that it, pray that it was alright and you know not really, fully understanding, the situation
45 whether erm you know, if it wasn't alright, why was God letting me be in these situations,
46 erm but if it was wrong then please forgive me (P2)
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3 The extract highlights an almost paradoxical relationship between beliefs about religion and
4 offending behaviour. This participant was able to justify their offending behaviour because ‘God’
5 was letting it happen and putting the participant in situations where it would happen. It also
6 highlights a clear ambivalent state while offending in that he wanted to repent and pray to ‘God’ if
7 he had caused harm. This highlights a recognition that he knew the behaviour was wrong, but he
8 was able to distance himself from the ‘wrongness’ by justifying his behaviour through ‘God’. Such
9 distancing is likely to allow for dissonance reduction in the individual (see Festinger, 1962), as it is
10 something ‘God’ has permitted. This links to findings by Topalli et al. (2012) who found that
11 religion can be used in self-serving ways by offenders and can have criminogenic elements. They
12 asserted that, through religion, some offenders were able to justify their past offences and excuse
13 the continuation of serious criminal conduct. At times, in participants’ narratives, God was
14 implicated in their offending behaviour as even being willing to let the offence happen.

30 Extract 20

31 y’know it it’s I honestly believe that God don’t do anything to me that he doesn’t think
32 that’s good for in in a sense maybe this whole idea of me coming into prison in the first
33 place was for me to reach this stage where I am now before I did something really bad - I’m
34 not saying my offence wasn’t bad (P5)

35 Participant 5 minimises his previous offending by asserting that God allowed his offending to take
36 place and for him to be subsequently punished so that he did not commit an offence that was “really
37 bad”. Within the theme ‘religion as a risky script’ there was a sense that offenders were passive
38 agents in their offending. In terms of current and future risk, God was a mediator of future risk,
39 many participants felt that now that they had God in their lives, they were not going to reoffend.

42 Extract 21

43 But I know now that you know my religion, my faith is now stronger and when I go out I’m

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3 going to keep my faith and I'm not going to give into temptation again (P8)
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7 This is worrying for a number of reasons – the potential impact on their stance around desistance –
8 if they feel that God is in control rather than they themselves, individuals may not make ‘best
9 efforts’ to comply with their risk management and supervision; indeed, a form of learned
10 helplessness (Seligman, 1975) may contribute to an unhelpful and less proactive approach to taking
11 personal responsibility for their desistance from reoffending.
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21 **2.2: Holier than Thou**

22 This theme draws upon narratives which described elements of competition either between
23 members of the in-group (I am the most faithful; I go every week, some don't) as participants either
24 spoke about themselves or others who tried to prove they were the ‘best’ Christian. Sometimes the
25 comparison was made between themselves and others (non-believers), but most of all between
26 themselves and others who said they were religious and perhaps went to chapel occasionally, or
27 even said they were religious but did not go to chapel at all. Some participants noted the differences
28 but did not really make any judgements on them, whilst others used them to bolster a sense of
29 superiority over others. This inflated sense of self-consequence and veering towards narcissism
30 might leave them in a weakened position in terms of managing their own risk.
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46 Extract 23

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48 But as I said before, there's wolves in the chapel, there's wolves in this chapel here, people
49 that just go to church for cup of teas or have a chat (P3)
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56 Extract 24

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3 But he's been somewhere where he shouldn't have been and he's come back to prison, I ask
4 myself times myself time and time again when I see, I ask myself why, he's Christian? In
5 my eyes, a true Christian shouldn't commit these sort of offences at all - these places - if
6 you're a true Christian - these sorts of places, shouldn't be here (P11)
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14 Participants talked about an in-group and out-group (Tajfel, 1982), although at times the
15 'out-group' were non-Christians, at times they were atheists and sometimes they were other
16 Christians who did not 'believe' or 'live' their Christianity as honestly as they should be doing. The
17 out-groups were perceived as not understanding, sometimes mocking, frightened or avoidant of
18 their offence, or even perhaps to be pitied, as highlighted in the extract below.
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28 Extract 22

29 I've never been in a situation where I don't believe but I can feel hollow inside when I've
30 not got enough God in me when I'm not feeding the God I can only imagine that same sort
31 of hunger for somebody who doesn't have a religion who doesn't know how to feed that
32 gap they've got in their life (P12)
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42 P12 uses the analogy of having, without God, an unmet 'hunger'. God is seen as sustenance, and,
43 without God, people are left 'hollow' and with a 'gap' in their lives, with something missing.
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49 **2.3: Losing my religion**

50 Participants were unequivocal in that having their faith was going to protect them against further
51 offending. Their religious beliefs were construed like a lucky charm to protect them from
52 reoffending. However, this belief is potentially problematic given that most of the sample were
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3 religious before offending. In terms of their future and how they would manage with license
4 conditions that constrain their opportunities to attend services, the majority of the participants were
5 concerned about how it would inhibit their own practice, and report difficulties others have had,
6 which have been attributed to not being able to attend services.
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14 Extract 25

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16 Erm or they've literally not been accepted and they've ended up sort of losing part of their
17 faith which, ultimately at the end of the day you know, sort of heading down the road of
18 maybe reoffending (P6)
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26 In the above extract, the participant suggests that reoffending occurs when someone follows the
27 wrong pathway, moving the focus of blame for reoffending on taking a particular direction rather
28 than on the individual themselves. A few participants explicitly acknowledged the difficulties
29 those with sexual convictions may face apropos license conditions, but seemed (when interviewed
30 in the prison, pre-release) comfortable with them.
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40 Extract 26

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42 Er, consequently, when I get outside, er one of the conditions I've got is that I cannot attend
43 a religious place of worship without prior approval. Er, that means I can't attend a place of
44 worship er without letting my probation officer know, but I know that God can attend me,
45 so consequently, in my own house, in my own, in my own thoughts, I can get in contact
46 with God whenever I feel like it (P1)
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56 It should be recognised that if the community spirit and religious sharing is not available to the
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3 offender on release, risk of reoffending may increase, either through difficulties coping with
4 increased feelings of social isolation or through the individual breaking license conditions to satiate
5 their need for a religious community experience. They may also become disappointed with the lack
6 of forgiveness of other Christians in the community, encouraging grievance-type thinking against
7 society, and potentially increasing their risk of reoffending.
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17 Another means, for some individuals, of 'losing their religion' was typified by feeling they did not
18 fit in with their religious doctrines as they (or others) understood them. Thus, a couple of the
19 participants recounted that they had turned away from religion because they believed that
20 homosexuality was not acceptable within the Church.
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26 Extract 27

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28 And, knowing that I couldn't go to church thinking well, you know they're not gonna
29 accept me because I'm gay, you know and, I couldn't go living a lie, coz I lived a lie all
30 my life, you know, it was just, one lie after another, me being not honest and truthful
31 to myself you know until I I came in here and then everything changed and, luckily
32 everyone's accepted me for who I am now... That's why I wanted to tell my story to you
33 because my c...my my partners exactly the same. He he felt that he couldn't be himself you
34 know, he had an uncle that committed suicide coz he was gay, his uncle. Err so he was
35 struggling. (P7)
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49 Struggling with the attitudes of the Church to their sexuality left some individuals rejected (and in
50 cases they stated that they went on to marry women so they seemed 'normal'). Fortunately, in this
51 prison, the chaplaincy adhere to the following:
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55 'Many religions have denominations of followers who believe that homosexual practice is
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3 wrong. It is the right of an individual follower to adhere to these teachings. However, such
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5 a follower has no right to impose these teachings on any other member of his faith
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8 community.
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12 All world faiths hold much in common. These include the dignity of an individual, the call
13
14 to refrain from judging and the call to extend forgiveness. Individuals from all faiths are
15
16 encouraged by their Chaplains at HMP [prison] to pursue these ideals at all times’.

17
18 (HMPP Chaplaincy Diversity statement, 2013).
19

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21 Consequently, individuals who previously felt rejected by the Church have found a way to be
22
23 themselves apropos their own sexuality and their religion.
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26 27 28 **Discussion**

29
30 O’Connor and Perreyclear (2002) postulated that almost 50 percent of prisoners in the US engaged
31
32 in religious practice. Whilst the extent and nature of engagement in such practice is likely to vary
33
34 considerably, high religiosity predicted fewer prison infractions and better adjustment to prison life
35
36 (Clear & Myhre, 1995). The current study demonstrated that religion was a source of strength for
37
38 many participants, echoing some of the findings from Dammer’s (2002) research that ‘sincere’
39
40 religious prisoners gained motivation, direction and meaning for life, peace of mind, positive
41
42 self-esteem and a change in lifestyle. Religion may also become a protective factor in terms of
43
44 reducing social isolation, when the ex-prisoner can integrate within a church or faith based
45
46 community (see Kewley, Beech & Harkins, 2015). Certainly, much of the evidence to date
47
48 supports the argument that religiosity can be a protective factor (see Johnson & Jang, 2011;
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50 Kewley et al, 2015). Moreover, the current study demonstrates there are a number of ancillary
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52 benefits to religion: participants were involved in peer support as a result of wanting to give back
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3 and portraying 'good selves'. Through faith, prisoners asserted they gained 'peace of mind' which
4
5 helped them cope with prison life; they spoke about the mental and emotional strength they gained
6
7 from feeling close to God, and of the desire to 'lead a good life'. All such factors can be related to
8
9 reducing evidence-base risk factors that include difficulty managing emotions, an anti-social life
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11 style and poor problem solving (Mann, Hanson & Thornton, 2010).
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15 However, the current study also highlights how faith may exacerbate or activate dynamic
16
17 risk factors. For example, where faith feeds into offence supportive beliefs, or creates undue
18
19 expectations of the religious community individuals feel aligned to and by whom they expect to be
20
21 welcomed on release. When undertaking the assessment of dynamic risk, the authors suggest it
22
23 would be useful to highlight the extent to which dynamic factors (such as emotional isolation) and
24
25 protective factors (such as purposeful activity) are integrated with religious behaviour and beliefs.
26
27 Thus, changes in circumstances that may be associated with heightened or reduced risk can be
28
29 identified and worked with.
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33 From the researchers' personal experience, taken together with reports from treatment
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35 facilitators working with prisoners (Wakame, 2014), therapists report that they can find religious
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37 beliefs difficult to manage or work with. Therapists may be wary of triggering a complaint of
38
39 religious prejudice, unsure as to whether they are dealing with a sincerely held belief and/or an
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41 offence-supportive attitude (or both), and difficulties challenging such attitudes or beliefs due to
42
43 lack of awareness and knowledge about the religion in question. Consequently, it is important that
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45 therapists are educated about religious beliefs and become religiously literate so that they can
46
47 understand, encourage, or challenge as appropriate. It is equally important that chaplains are
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49 brought into the treatment picture as they are best placed to educate therapists, but also best placed
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51 to manage and address the expectations of religious offenders and deal with offence supportive
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53 beliefs that are hooked onto an individual's religious beliefs.
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3 The authors comprise two atheists (with one having a Catholic upbringing) and one
4 religious individual (Pagan). Between them, they intend to make no judgment with regard to
5 religion, agreeing that 'religious practices themselves may be judged either progressive or
6 regressive by virtue of how they play out in a person's life. If they enlarge one's vision, support
7 one's psychosocial development, and provide meaningful linkages to the cosmos and one's
8 community, then surely religion is psychologically healthy. If, on the other hand, religious attitudes
9 foster guilt, dependency, polarized thinking, shadow projections and so on, thwarting the
10 acceptance of personal responsibility, then surely they are unhealthy' (Hollis, 1998, p. 116).
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24 *Limitations of research*

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26 The research was conducted with a self-selected group of religious (Christian) participants; these
27 participants were likely to be some of the more committed religious Christians, and the data were
28 potentially skewed. That said, if there is an impact of religion on reoffending or desistance, then it
29 remains useful to understand individuals who self-identify as Christian in beliefs and behaviour.
30 An additional limitation of the research was that detailed offence information was not collated. It
31 was decided that requesting this information would be detrimental to the researcher-participant
32 interaction and would potentially skew the participant in spending time justifying their offences.
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44 *Future studies*

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46 Further studies are underway with Buddhist offenders at the same establishment, with further
47 studies planned across each religious group at the prison. It will be interesting to consider each
48 group separately but also conduct a thematic analysis across all studies, treating participants as a
49 homogenous group of religious individuals. Such research may help to identify practices and
50 values, drawn from a range of religions and spiritualities that might act as benevolent by-products
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3 of a religion and thus act not simply as protective factors for the religious individuals concerned but
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5 may be broadened to others (an example being the Buddhist teaching of mindfulness). A
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7 large-scale quantitative study would be able to examine desistance of religious individuals
8
9 focusing on the mechanism for desistance (such as the role of prayer in emotional regulation)
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11 posited by this and other qualitative studies, including those relating to religious conversion and the
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13 reasons behind this (Thomas, Vollm, Winder & Abdelrazek, 2016).
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19 **Conclusions**

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21 Religion may be viewed as a challenge for prison staff: disrupting routine, allowing individuals to
22
23 defend offence-supportive beliefs in the 'name' of their religion and potentially 'masquerading'
24
25 behind an 'I've found religion' façade. Similarly, chaplains can face criticism and undermining by
26
27 staff who may not consider the chaplaincy as part of the professional team supporting offenders,
28
29 perhaps viewing them as a 'soft option'. Yet, the chaplaincy can play a pivotal role in unravelling
30
31 the entrenched and unhelpful beliefs of prisoners and encouraging them towards positive values
32
33 and behaviour. The authors suggest that more dialogue is needed between chaplaincy and other
34
35 professionals involved in the care and treatment of offenders, and the impact of an individual's
36
37 religious beliefs (with putative additions to risk and/or protective factors) are explored more
38
39 systematically. Further, it would be useful to extricate the role and function of individual
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41 spirituality from community faith involvement in understanding the potential role of religion in
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43 desistance and recidivism.
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7
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Table 1: Participant information

P	Christian denomination	Occupation	Where was God when you offended?	Religious before / after offending
1	Salvation Army	Schoolteacher	'God left me for a while'	Fully immersed from childhood
2	Methodist	Various jobs including as Church warden	Still there, convinced he was showing the church boys pleasure; when he asked for guidance from God, nothing happened	Religious from age of nine
3	Church of England (then converted to Catholic)	Unemployed	'God was nowhere in this, I was in the devil's grasp'	Religious from adolescence
4	Church of England	Ran a business	'I was probably as far from him as you can get - I certainly wasn't holding on to any of the values that that you hold onto in the bible'	Religious upbringing, but as a teenager lost interest; found church again when first in prison
5	Catholic	Worked on a power station	'I was y'know very very confused and dark place at the time in my life there was a lot going on'	Raised as religious, less interested as teenager but more so again early 20s
6	Catholic	Drug dealer	'And er got myself too involved with drugs and religion and God weren't even in my mind they were well away. I mean I wouldn't say it was a case of, God left me, like I've heard some people say. It was more a case of, I'd left God'	Very early age, junior school
7	Roman Catholic	Various temporary jobs	'And, knowing that I couldn't go to church thinking well, you know they're not gonna accept me because I'm gay, you know and, I couldn't go living a lie'	Brought up as RC
8	Church of England	Various, including teacher	'And this was the first time in my life where I've felt that the devils got hold of me'	From Christian family though parents not regular church goers, relative was a priest
9	Christian	Various, including farm work	'It's something I never really thought about at the time because, as I was saying I turned, I turned me faith and I found, as I said the company of children I found very, er, pleasant and that and, on what, what I was, the sexual part of it I just saw it as	From about 5/6 years of age was taken to Sunday School

			another, another avenue, I was giving, I was giving love to the child'	
10	Methodist	Park Management	'It's not as if I tripped up overnight I chose a terrible journey for a number of months....committed a sin'	Went to Sunday school from an early age though family were not really religious
11	Catholic	Various jobs including mortgage broker	'When I come to prison I was always helping people, don't get me wrong as a bloke that I'm not making excuse I am not making an excuse for what I done but helping people eventually got me into trouble'	As an adult, married a Catholic and became religious himself
12	Quaker	Various including bicycle repair	'Stopped listening to God'	Religious all his life

Table 2: Superordinate and subordinate themes from dataset.

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
1: The God Effect	1.1: Religion as Coping Mechanism
	1.2: Leading a Good Life
	1.3: Therapeutic Effect of Chapel, Chaplaincy and Faith
2: The Shadow Side of Religion	2.1: Risky Scripts
	2.2: Holier than Thou
	2.3: Losing my Religion