



**“The resurrection after the old has gone and the new has come”: Understanding narratives of forgiveness, redemption and resurrection in Christian individuals serving time in custody for a sexual offence**

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**“The resurrection after the old has gone and the new has come”: Understanding narratives of forgiveness, redemption and resurrection in Christian individuals serving time in custody for a sexual offence**

For Peer Review Only

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6 **Keywords:** Sexual offenders, qualitative, sexual offending, IPA, Christian, religious  
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9

10 **Abstract**  
11

12 Research has shown how religion is associated with numerous positive effects including  
13 enhanced mood, increased feelings of hope, increased altruistic behaviour, improved ability  
14 to cope and also reducing people's involvement in delinquent and criminal behaviour.  
15  
16 However, this has also been contested with some arguing that religion can have  
17  
18 criminogenic effects. Whilst there is a growing body of research concerning the effect  
19  
20 (criminogenic or positive) of religion on offending, there is currently a paucity of research  
21  
22 focusing on sexual offending and religion. The aim of this study was to explore and  
23  
24 understand the effects that religious beliefs have on individuals with sexual convictions'  
25  
26 sense of self, identity, their thoughts about the future and on their daily lives in prison. The  
27  
28 results focus on a centrally important superordinate theme related to forgiveness and  
29  
30 redemption. The analysis unpacks participants' narratives of forgiveness and the impact  
31  
32 such narratives have on participants. A key finding from the data in this study was that  
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34 religious beliefs and being forgiven by a higher power appeared to facilitate redemptive  
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36 selves and the enacting of these selves. Implications for practice and limitations are  
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38 discussed.  
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## Introduction

There is now growing recognition of the importance of understanding the process of desistance from sexual crime. In particular, it is important to consider how individuals can bolster protective factors, for example, positive self-identity (de Vries Robbé, Mann, Maruna, & Thornton, 2015; Perrin, Blagden, Winder & Dillon, 2017). This follows a shift in policy and practice towards a more integrated model of understanding sexual offending which accounts for the desistance process (Göbbels et al., 2012), and a greater emphasis on building upon people's strengths.

Protective factors are social, interpersonal, and environmental factors, as well as psychological and behavioural features that are empirically linked to reducing sexual offending (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015). Farmer et al. (2012) asserted that an important factor for differentiating desisters from those at active risk was identification within a social group or network. Belonging to a religious group is potentially one such protective factor, though presently little is known, especially qualitatively, of how religious context might help or hinder desistance (Kewley et al., 2015). It is therefore important that we begin to understand the psychological impact of belonging to a religious group for individuals with sexual convictions and to consider the role it could play within protective (or risk) factors (Bell, Winder & Blagden, 2018).

On an individual level, religiosity is associated with enhanced mood (Hicks & King, 2008), 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 and/or in forensic environments 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,

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2  
3 imprisonment and social rejection (Aydin, Fischer & Frey 2010) and improved adjustment to  
4 the prison environment (Clear & Sumter, 2002). For those already imprisoned, religiosity has  
5 also been demonstrated as reducing general prison deviance, including violence, arguments  
6 and adjudications (Kerley, Copes, Tewksbury & Dabney, 2010; O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002).  
7  
8 For those who are successful at desisting from crime, religiosity has been attributed as a  
9 source of their desistance (Hallett & McCoy, 2014). In a review of the literature surrounding  
10 the relationship between religion and crime, Johnson and Jang (2011) found an  
11 overwhelmingly benevolent impact of religion on crime, supporting the argument that  
12 religiosity can be a protective factor.

13  
14 However, the relationship between religion and offending is contested and is not  
15 straightforward. There has been a reported criminogenic effect of religion, whereby religion  
16 facilitates crime; for example, contributing to cognitive distortions that facilitate crime (Knabb,  
17 Welsh & Graham-Howard, 2012; Saradjian & Nobus, 2003). In their study of street crime  
18 offenders, Topalli, Brezina and Bernhardt (2013) reported that religion could be used in self-  
19 serving ways by individuals who interpreted religious doctrine in a way that allowed them to  
20 justify their behaviour and exacerbate their offending. Religion may also help people justify  
21 their offending behaviour retrospectively. Researchers have analysed the narratives of  
22 religious people who have offended and found some to be inherently criminogenic (Tyler &  
23 Devinitz, 1981).

24  
25 There is currently a paucity of research focusing on sexual offending and religion. Kewley et  
26 al. (2017) have contributed to our understanding of the experiences of religious individuals  
27 who have committed sexual offences as they seek to re-engage with faith communities  
28 following release from prison. They argued that, for those convicted of sexual offending who  
29 wish to reform, and for whom religion is genuinely important, a religious or spiritual

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3 environment might operate in two meaningful ways; first, as a catalyst to change; and second,  
4  
5 as a maintenance mechanism for the desistance process. However, there is currently a lack  
6  
7 of understanding as to how these processes may commence or manifest themselves in prison  
8  
9 settings. There is a need for qualitative investigations to understand the role of religion in  
10  
11 convicted individuals with sexual convictions and the impact it can have on identity and  
12  
13 personal reform (Bell, Winder & Blagden, 2018). For example, religious converts in prison  
14  
15 routinely construct a “prosocial narrative identity” that can account for why their prior actions  
16  
17 are not true reflections of their core selves and why their present and future actions have  
18  
19 new meaning and significance (Kerley & Copes 2009). This narrative shift is an important  
20  
21 aspect in the creation of a pro-social identity and also for the desistance process. Indeed,  
22  
23 religious narratives in this sense could allow for a new lens through which people can view  
24  
25 their lives, and an opportunity to reinterpret their current situation into something more  
26  
27 positive and manageable (Kerley & Copes 2008, Maruna et al. 2006). The ‘redemption script’,  
28  
29 for example, is characterised by wanting to ‘give something back’ and a recognition that,  
30  
31 although they cannot change the past, they control their present and future actions (Maruna,  
32  
33 2001).

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42 The current extant literature around religion and sexual offending predominantly comprises  
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44 studies of prevalence or are focused on catholic priests and abuse (Langevin, Curnoe & Bain,  
45  
46 2000; Plante, 2003). These studies represent important work, but they tell us relatively little  
47  
48 about the more general impact of religious beliefs on sexual offending or desistance from  
49  
50 sexual offending. Kewley et al.’s (2017) research has been important for understanding  
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52 individuals with sexual convictions’ reintegration within society and how it can be helped by  
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54 their engagement with a religious group or community. However, the role religion plays for  
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56 this client group while incarcerated as well as the potential impact this may have on  
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3 desistance and rehabilitation remains unclear. Specifically, while religion has been  
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5 conceptually linked to desistance (see e.g., Perrin et al, 2016), little is known about the  
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7 process by which religion and spirituality promote desistance from crime and personal change  
8  
9 (Schroeder & Frana, 2009). This study aims to investigate the accounts of religious individuals  
10  
11 who have been convicted of sexual offences in order to explore and understand the effects  
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13 that religious beliefs have on their sense of self, their personal identity, their thoughts about  
14  
15 the future and on their daily lives in prison. This work is vital for considering the role of religion  
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17 in desistance.  
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## 25 **Method**

### 26 *Participants*

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28 The participants comprised 12 adult male individuals convicted for sexual offending who were  
29  
30 currently serving sentences at a category C (medium-secure closed conditions). Participant  
31  
32 information is detailed in Table one; participants were aged between 40 and 72 years,  
33  
34 predominantly White British (one White Other); and comprised a mixture of Christian  
35  
36 denominations, and had committed a range of sexual offences (predominantly child sexual  
37  
38 offences).  
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50 [insert table 1 here]

### 51 *Data Collection*

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56 The authors were granted ethical approval by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service  
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3 (HMPPS) and a UK University. Information about the research was advertised in the  
4  
5 chaplaincy (via posters and leaflets), and the chaplaincy team highlighted the research to  
6  
7 individuals attending Christian services. Further information sheets were sent out to any  
8  
9 prison resident who expressed an interest in participating in the research.  
10  
11

12  
13 All participants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis by one of the authors (one White  
14  
15 British Pagan female, one White British Atheist male, one White British Atheist female) in a  
16  
17 dedicated interview room within the prison, offering a private and respectful environment for  
18  
19 participants to 'tell their stories' (Waldram, 2007, p.963). Each interview was recorded on a  
20  
21 passcode-protected dictaphone and transcribed verbatim.  
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26  
27 The sample size ( $N=12$ ) is appropriate for qualitative research where intensive rather than  
28  
29 extensive analysis is prioritised across a range of methodologies (e.g., Smith, 2015). The  
30  
31 requirement with small  $N$  research is not to achieve a random sample, but instead the  
32  
33 researcher should try to attain a closely matched sample for which the research question will  
34  
35 be significant (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Data were collected through semi-structured  
36  
37 interviews of between 1.5-3 hours. The interview schedule was developed through  
38  
39 consultation with colleagues and structured into five broad sections:  
40  
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42  
43

44 [1] Questions about faith, their beliefs and the values they associated with their religion  
45

46  
47 [2] Self, home and family environment, personal information (such as occupation and age)  
48  
49

50 [3] Religious beliefs in relation to their offending  
51

52  
53 [4] Treatment  
54

55  
56 [5] Future plans, goals, and coping outside prison  
57  
58  
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60 The interview schedule was used flexibly - with open prompting and probing from the



1  
2  
3 interviewers – rather than using the interview schedule as a fixed agenda (Loaring et al., 2015).  
4  
5 In this way, participants were free to articulate their own thoughts and central concerns and,  
6  
7 crucially, were able to think, speak and be heard. Indeed, the focus of this paper’s analysis is  
8  
9 on a theme which was entirely driven by the participants and not explicitly discussed by the  
10  
11 researchers. Yet every participant spoke in detail about forgiveness, redemption and how  
12  
13 such concepts were affecting their self-identity and, consequently, behaviour.  
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### 18 *Data Analytical Procedure*

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21 The research utilised the analytic method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)  
22  
23 since, as Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005, p. 20) argue ‘participants are recruited because of  
24  
25 their expertise in the phenomenon being explored’. IPA examines how participants make  
26  
27 sense of their personal and social worlds (Osborn & Smith, 2008), and its central concern is  
28  
29 with the subjective experiences of individuals (Eatough & Smith, 2006). IPA’s emphasis on  
30  
31 sense-making by the participant and researcher enables it to be described as having cognition  
32  
33 as a central analytic concern, and as having a theoretical alliance with cognition and language  
34  
35 (Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008). For Eatough and Smith (2006, p. 486), participants are  
36  
37 “experiencing, meaning-making, embedded and discursive agent [s]”. IPA is a double  
38  
39 hermeneutic method (i.e. there are two layers of interpretation) where participants seek to  
40  
41 explain and interpret their own experiences, and researchers subsequently re-interpret  
42  
43 participants’ interpretations of their accounts of these experiences (Loaring et al. 2015). The  
44  
45 sample size of this IPA study, while large for this type of methodological approach, is in  
46  
47 accordance with previous research (see Blagden et al., 2011; Flowers et al., 2006).  
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51 Analysis was guided by previous research (see Smith, 2015) and entailed detailed reading,  
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53 re-reading and analysis of each transcript individually, before selecting those themes that  
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3 emerged in at least half of the transcripts (see Dickson, Knussen & Flowers, 2008). Emergent  
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5 themes were subsequently clustered under superordinate headings. With such a  
6  
7 comparatively large sample for IPA, the researchers endeavoured to counterbalance the  
8  
9 capture and presentation of rich idiographic data against the extraction and reporting of  
10  
11 recurring themes across the dataset. During this data organisation process, the researchers  
12  
13 engaged in a continual iterative process, moving between themes and transcripts to ensure  
14  
15 that the themes selected were representative of participants' accounts and the extracts.  
16  
17 The researchers also implemented a qualitative form of inter-rater reliability. This process  
18  
19 involves checking the interpretations of the data by consulting other colleagues/researchers  
20  
21 (Willig, 2008). All the authors independently analysed sections of transcripts and then  
22  
23 shared coding and themes in data analysis sessions with all authors present to ensure that  
24  
25 similar codes and themes were emerging from the data.  
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### 36 **Analysis and Discussion**

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38 This paper focuses on one particular theme or aspect of the data and relates to the crux of  
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40 IPA, that of idiographic data analysis and presentation (see e.g., Eatough & Smith, 2006;  
41  
42 Winder & Gough, 2010). The analysis focuses on one particularly salient superordinate  
43  
44 theme 'the road to redemption' and its associated subordinate themes, which emerged  
45  
46 from the data analysis process (see table 2).  
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52 [insert table 2 here]  
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57 All subordinate themes will be unpacked and discussed.  
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### **Superordinate Theme 1: The road to redemption**

This superordinate theme is derived from participants' narratives of redemption and forgiveness. The crux of this theme is how individuals, who were serving a prison sentence for a sexual offence, were using religion to help re-story aspects of their lives and to achieve a measure of forgiveness, redemption and absolution. Although participants were not explicitly asked about forgiveness or redemption, the concepts were discussed at length by each participant.

#### **Subordinate theme 1.1: The act of forgiveness, the act of contrition**

Religion appeared to offer a framework for forgiveness for participants in this study (Maruna, et al. 2006). While some participants stated that they do not "forgive themselves", at least not entirely, most stated that they felt God had forgiven them. This notion of being 'forgiven' by a higher power had clear redemptive properties.

##### Extract 1

*Father upstairs has forgiven me I haven't forgiven myself...I'd committed a sin in the past but he's made it clear to me so he's not holding that against me (participant 1)*

This extract highlights the participant's belief that god has forgiven him and does not "hold it against him". The forgiveness from a 'higher power' may be pivotal in helping people transform their identity and reduce any dissonance associated with their past identity and actions. Indeed, there is a definitive belief presented in this extract that God has forgiven him as "he's made it clear" to him. Extract 1 demonstrates how he had committed a 'bad act' in the past, but God is not holding it against him so he can move on.

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6 There was a consistent narrative from the participants that God's forgiveness had  
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8 redemptive properties and being forgiven by God also helped to instil hope in participants.  
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13 Extract 2  
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15 *You know, er, anybody, can be forgiven by God. You don't have to go to a meeting to*  
16 *do it, you can walk down the street and be forgiven by God. Er, so consequently, I*  
17 *don't think I'm a lost cause, er, I know what I do was wrong, er, I accept that, I'm not*  
18 *argued in a situation where I've said no I don't believe that (participant 4)*  
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28 Here the participant describes themselves as not being a 'lost cause' due to forgiveness  
29 from God. God's forgiveness allowed participants to feel redeemed and this was leading  
30 participants to construe a future positively, and with a sense of hope. Through his Christian  
31 beliefs, the participant is able to demonstrate that he is on the path towards redemption.  
32 This belief also acts as an important mechanism as it affords him the belief that change is  
33 possible and that he is not 'doomed to deviance' (Maruna & Copes, 2005). This links with  
34 Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralisation technique 'appeal to higher loyalties'. However,  
35 instead of the technique facilitating offending, as in the original conception, it appears it is  
36 being used to help the participant re-story his life in a positive manner. Thus believing that a  
37 higher power is "behind" you and protecting you, the journey towards redemption may  
38 become easier or seem more achievable.  
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3 Forgiveness also seemed to be gained through performative religious practices, such as  
4  
5 receiving the Eucharist, which can assist individuals in enacting their religious selves  
6  
7  
8 (Bidwell, 2008).  
9

10  
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12  
13 Extract 3  
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17  
18 *And they're like oh right I see what you mean so when we eat it Jesus is then present*  
19  
20 *within us and then y'know we've got the holy spirit in us coz when we're when we're*  
21  
22 *baptised we believe the holy spirit descends and y'know comes into us and all that lot*  
23  
24 *but y'see at that time as well because at the moment of baptism we believe that*  
25  
26 *we're free from sin so in my eyes now I 've not committed a sex offence or anything*  
27  
28 *like that since I've been baptised and I ain't going to because not saying because of*  
29  
30 *I've been baptised but that is a massive stop and think thing if y'know what I mean*  
31  
32 *because if I did then to me it would be as good as committing a mortal sin coz I*  
33  
34 *believe I've got the holy spirit in me Jesus in my every Saturday morning or Sunday*  
35  
36 *morning when I go to mass and for me to do something like that I've blown it as far*  
37  
38 *as I'm concerned for want of a better word I've blown it and I don't wanna do that*  
39  
40 *because now I y'know to an extent dare I say I've got that ultimate forgiveness from*  
41  
42 *god for whatever I've done before so now I can move on and the good thing about it*  
43  
44 *as well is because I was so ashamed about those offences it was crushing me*  
45  
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51  
52 (Participant 5)  
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56  
57 Here the participant discusses Eucharistic embodiment, in that by taking the Eucharist they  
58  
59 are taking on God. This Eucharist symbolism and the participant's baptism seem to facilitate  
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3 a number of important psychological mechanisms. For example, in extract three, there is a  
4 distance in how he construes himself and his offending behaviour, in that participant five is  
5  
6 “not a sexual offender”. Resistance to being labelled a “sexual offender” is likely to have  
7  
8 positive implications for the individual, in that adopting and internalizing such a label leaves  
9  
10 the individual with an impaired ability to achieve self-respect and affiliation with  
11  
12 mainstream society (Maruna et al. 2009). Whilst belonging to a group normally has  
13  
14 wellbeing benefits for an individual’s ‘social cure’ (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012), where identity is  
15  
16 with a stigmatised group of individuals this becomes a ‘social curse’ with numerous negative  
17  
18 effects. For people who have committed a sexual offence, the social curse of ‘sex  
19  
20 offenderness’ will saturate every area of an individual’s life, including relationships, housing,  
21  
22 and employment.  
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32 It has been argued that taking the Eucharist is important for axes of self and can allow for an  
33  
34 integrated and coherent self (Hampson, 2005). Whether or not this process galvanises self-  
35  
36 identity or whether enacting/performing such roles allows stories/actions/narratives that  
37  
38 shape behaviour is perhaps irrelevant. Narrative approaches argue that self-narratives help  
39  
40 shape future behaviour as people tend to act in line with the stories they present about  
41  
42 themselves (McAdams, 1985). Participants were also cognisant that forgiveness is  
43  
44 conditional to some degree, in that it may be granted once but not again in the eyes of God.  
45  
46 Several participants, including participant five, alluded to this by articulating that to commit  
47  
48 such an offence again would be a ‘mortal sin’. The act of forgiveness, first by God and then  
49  
50 by others, was allowing participants to believe that they could move on with their life;  
51  
52 however, there was a sense that, before forgiveness was given, there first needed to be  
53  
54 acceptance of what they had done.  
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6 *Extract 4*

7  
8 *I: What do you think God would have thought about your offences at the time*

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11 *R: I can feel him crying but I pray for his forgiveness and I pray everyday for my victim*  
12  
13 *and her parents and her grandparents and her brother I I pray that they all have*  
14  
15 *strength*

16  
17  
18 *I: do you feel that God has forgiven you*

19  
20  
21 *R: He won't forget unless you're truly sorry*

22  
23 *I: Yeah*

24  
25 *R: And I am truly sorry but it's not up to me to judge whether he's forgiven me I won't*  
26  
27 *know that until I go to heaven or go to hell (Participant 12)*  
28  
29  
30  
31

32  
33 Here the participant's narrative demonstrates that he feels he is forgiven as he is truly sorry  
34  
35 for his offences. Forgiveness was a central theme running through all participants' narratives,  
36  
37 the pronoun use of 'I' in extract four indicates how meaningful forgiveness and being forgiven  
38  
39 is for this participant and this is emphasised in his asking for forgiveness "every day". This  
40  
41 notion of repeatedly asking for forgiveness appeared across all participants' transcripts.  
42  
43 Forgiveness is a core Christian value and it is thought that forgiveness enhances one's  
44  
45 relationship with God and is part of carrying out "God's plan" (Rye et al., 2001; Macaskill,  
46  
47 2007). Research has shown that while Christian clergy feel forgiveness is unlimited and not  
48  
49 wholly dependent on repentance, the general public perceive forgiveness as having limits  
50  
51 and that repentance is necessary (Macaskill, 2005; 2007). It is interesting to note that, in  
52  
53 participants' narratives, it was God's forgiveness which appeared the most important.  
54  
55 Participants appeared to want forgiveness from others and some had not fully forgiven  
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3 themselves, but were unanimous that God had forgiven them. It may be that forgiveness from  
4  
5 a higher power enables one to feel redeemed without the need for public approval, as long  
6  
7 as they are “truly sorry”. Feeling forgiven by God may allow offenders to forgive their own  
8  
9 prior transgressions and allow active responsibility taking in the future (Bakken, Gunter &  
10  
11 Visher, 2014).  
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18 Related to the constant asking for forgiveness was the notion of ‘confession’, one needed to  
19  
20 confess in order to be absolved from the sin.  
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22  
23  
24

25 *Extract 5*

26  
27 *I'm meant to do [confession] at least once a month. So I can imagine that's gunna be*  
28  
29 *quite hard, because by rights I should confess every sin I've ever committed... I*  
30  
31 *suppose it's it's, it's sort of the embarrassment of confessing it to, although I know*  
32  
33 *the priest, it's, I don't know him like I know some people on the wings or something*  
34  
35 *like that, urm, so it's telling him all these things about me and that and being judged*  
36  
37 *all over again, urm, sort of whenever I've had to talk about my offence with anyone*  
38  
39 *else, you can feel yourself being judged which, you you do expect but, it's it's never*  
40  
41 *pleasant (Participant 7)*  
42  
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50 There was some reluctance in participants' ‘confessing’ of their sins and this was not a  
51  
52 process that participants relished. Indeed while ‘being absolved’ though repentance was a  
53  
54 theme which emerged from the data the flip-side to this meant that the ‘self’ became an  
55  
56 object under scrutiny. For example, confessing in a public or private setting induces shame  
57  
58 and embarrassment. Indeed, the experience of shame can evoke feelings of wanting to hide  
59  
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3 and avoid responsibility; it can also impair empathy, perspective-taking and self-esteem  
4  
5 (Blagden, Lievesley & Ware, 2016; Marshall et al., 2009). As can be noted in extract five, the  
6  
7 participant discusses how confession evokes feelings of embarrassment, judgement and  
8  
9 shame. This process of confession mirrors the disclosure orientation of most  
10  
11 treatment programmes. However, constant confessing can have negative consequences.  
12  
13 Lacombe (2007) has been critical of sex offender treatment programmes turning individuals  
14  
15 into “confession machines”, due to the heavy emphasis there has been previously on  
16  
17 confession in such treatment programmes. Lacombe (2007) argues that this leads to actively  
18  
19 constructing the identity of the ‘sex offender’. This is in line with current thinking that  
20  
21 making excuses and presenting the self in a positive light may actually be beneficial,  
22  
23 whereas taking full responsibility may lead to the internalisation of the criminal label  
24  
25 (Marshall, Marshall & Ware, 2009; Maruna, 2001). However, new intervention targeted at  
26  
27 individuals with sexual convictions focus on pro-social identity and active responsibility and  
28  
29 reject confessional/disclosure-based approaches which were prevalent in previous  
30  
31 programmes (Walton et al. 2017).  
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#### 42 **Subordinate theme 1.2: *Forgiving the self***

43  
44 While the focus of the previous theme was on ‘being’ forgiven by God and narratives of  
45  
46 forgiveness that stemmed from such narratives, this theme focuses more explicitly on self-  
47  
48 forgiveness. This was an important theme, which was separate from the act of forgiveness.  
49  
50 A central tenant of Christianity is that any human being is forgivable and will always be  
51  
52 forgivable, even if only by God (Guardian, 2017). While most participants felt that God had  
53  
54 forgiven them this appeared to lead to a process of self-forgiveness over time.  
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## Extract 6

so it was a big help in some ways forgiving myself and moving on from it, urm, while I don't wanna forget the past, spending too much time dwelling on it isn't healthy either... Without forgiving myself I would, I'm never gonna be able to move on and if I don't move on properly, that's a negative circle urm you know, I don't really stand a chance of getting out the door if I'm, gonna beat myself up about it and become all depressed over it and, like I've seen some people do in here. Urm, so you've gotta be able to forgive yourself to sort of move on. (Participant 5)

The importance of forgiving the 'self' emerged in participants' narratives as a form of being future orientated and important for the process of 'moving on'. There was some reluctance in participants to 'fully' forgive themselves, but there was a consistent theme that self-forgiveness was important for a positive future. Being able to forgive the 'self' appeared a form of 'active responsibility-taking' (Ware & Mann, 2012) in that there was a recognition by participants that they could not change the past, but that ruminating on it was not constructive, and that no-one was preventing them from taking ownership of future behaviours.

## Extract 7

"no one, no matter what they've done, is beyond repentance and forgiveness."  
(Participant 11)

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6 The process of forgiveness and forgiving the 'self' seemed a powerful motivator for change  
7  
8 in many participants, as they felt not beyond forgiveness and most participants were eager  
9  
10 to have constructive lives and wanted to make amends for their crime. Religiosity in the  
11  
12 participants appeared to help facilitate this process of self-forgiveness through beliefs that a  
13  
14 higher power had forgiven them. The confessional and repentant nature of Christianity  
15  
16 appears to have some tension with current thinking regarding offender reform which moves  
17  
18 away from purely being offence-focused and disclosure based and instead focuses on  
19  
20 meaningful pro-social goals, leading a good life and protective factors (Walton et al. 2017).  
21  
22 Certainly religion, as noted in participants' extracts, contributes to this, but the focus on  
23  
24 looking backwards (passive responsibility-taking), may inadvertently cause an internalisation  
25  
26 of negative labels (Ware & Mann, 2012).  
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### 35 **Subordinate theme 1.3: The Resurrected and Redemptive Self**

36  
37 There was a sense in participants' narratives that, through religion, they were able to re-  
38  
39 story their lives. They had emerged out of the offending experience as a new person who  
40  
41 wants to do 'good' and who has changed from their old self; this process was consolidated  
42  
43 through their religious beliefs. This resurrected self was seen as a product of the 'old self'  
44  
45 who was now qualitatively different to the current self.  
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#### 54 **Extract 8**

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56  
57 *Sorry I keep interrupting the only time I brought it into church sorry*

58  
59 *the programme was what I told you about the amazing grace and when I come off*  
60

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3 *the um CORE programme I doing my daily readings and it was Corinthians 5 chapter*  
4  
5 *17 and the resurrection after the old has gone and the new has come and started and*  
6  
7 *I thought how appropriate that is coming towards the end of my old programmes the*  
8  
9 *old has gone (Participant 10)*  
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15 In this extract, the old self is 'knifed off' and is seen as incongruent with 'new me'. The  
16 participant's religious beliefs are helping make sense of this 'identity transformation' and  
17 creating a narrative frame whereby one becomes their 'resurrected' good self. This is a  
18 potentially powerful narrative as past offending behaviour is construed as part of the old  
19 self and so is incompatible with their new identity (Vaughan, 2007).  
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30 Linked to analysis in the previous theme participants discussed how repentance meant that  
31 God would forgive them and through such forgiveness they could be absolved from their  
32 sins. However, participants discussed how they needed to "live up to" God's forgiveness by  
33 not offending again in the future. God's forgiveness appeared to help participants take  
34 personal responsibility for their future actions but, as is clear from extract eight, people  
35 need to be sincere to be forgiven.  
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47 Extract 9

48  
49 *...that's why I'm making sure I'll never go down that line again which I won't...I've*  
50  
51 *been, forgiven for this once before, but for me to go and do it again now, would be,*  
52  
53 *like, (sigh) how can I put it erm, laughing at, behind his back sort of thing. And that*  
54  
55 *would be totally wrong. And not only that, it's not in good practice as a catholic to*  
56  
57 *hurt people and that's what I've done you know, with, with victims. (Participant 7)*  
58  
59  
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## Extract 10

*I know deep down and I feel it inside that I am forgiven. And that my heavenly father does love me and he is, he has forgiven me. And it's up to me to show that appreciation that he has forgiven me by keeping on the straight and narrow (Participant 2)*

In extract nine, the participant is articulating that through God's forgiveness he can be redeemed and that it is now up to him to demonstrate that he has changed by keeping on the "straight and narrow". The redemptive self is a powerful motivator of change because one's identity becomes invested in this narrative of change (McAdams, 2006). In essence, redemption is the deliverance from suffering to a positive, affective, state. In cultural narratives, common redemptive narratives incorporate forms of Christian atonement with redemption being one of the strongest themes in Western culture (McAdams, 2004; 2006). A negative emotional event becomes the opening act in a transformative and redemptive sequence. The positive ending (i.e. being a 'new' person and being redeemed by God), can become an enduring sense of positive self-transformation within the identity-defining life story (McAdams, 2004). The 'redemption script', for example, is characterised by wanting to 'give something back' and a recognition that, although they cannot change the past, they are aware that no-one but them can control their present and future (Maruna, 2001). For the participants, there does appear to be limits to this narrative and to 'God's forgiveness'. For example, in extracts nine and ten, the participants are clear that future offending would mean that God would no longer forgive them and so it would be difficult to cultivate the redemptive self through religious narratives if they committed further offences.

## Extract 11

*I firmly believe that God's changing me, you are being renewed every day once you are y'know you become a new Christian it's amazing forget where it is now but when you are born again that I'm a different person and you change to become the likeness of god (Participant 4)*

Participant 4's narrative appears to be characterised by 'moral reform', in that he has been reborn through his process of "getting right with god" and being changed by God (Presser & Kurth, 2009). Through such narratives, prisoners could portray 'good selves' and assert that the person who offended is not really who they are (ibid). As is evident in this theme the redemptive properties of religion and religious beliefs allows for a process of self reconstrual and identity change, whereby the individual is changed (and ultimately redeemed) through God. There was a sense of identity metamorphosis (see Robinson & Smith, 2009) in participants' narratives in that participants seemed to be engaged in a 'rebirth' plot, whereby the individual begins in an adverse setting and through various plot twists and turns becomes a 'new' person. This transformative episode (or rebirth) has been found to occur during and after traumatic events and is related to identity transitions (Robinson & Smith, 2009). Participants appeared to be promulgating transformed selves, which were achieved through being changed by god and through being redeemed. This identity metamorphosis has been linked to redemptive episodes where the negative past is reconstrued as a positive as it has led to the transformation of that person (McAdams, 2006). Maruna, Wilson and Curran (2006) found that religious 'conversion' helped prisoners maintain a viable identity in a time typified by identity crisis. Such conversion was seen as an

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2  
3 adaptive mechanism in shame management and allowed negative labels to be replaced with  
4  
5 a new identity (see also Thomas, Vollm, Winder & Abdelrazek, 2016). It also provided the  
6  
7 individual with a framework of forgiveness. All participants alluded to wanting to be  
8  
9 redeemed, with the need for redemption a reoccurring theme. Indeed, when we consider  
10  
11 populist views of 'sexual offenders', the rejection of the old offending self (one which is  
12  
13 shamed) for a redemptive self, a new self which has changed, is understandable. Through  
14  
15 self-forgiveness and belonging to Christianity and the chapel, participants were also actively  
16  
17 engaged in demonstrating their changed selves (e.g., through becoming peer supporters in  
18  
19 prison or through helping peers in other ways), thereby actively demonstrating their 'caring  
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21 side'.  
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30 Extract 12

31  
32 *y'know that same wanting to make sure people are okay fits in with when I was in*  
33  
34 *chapel y'know people that came to me with problems you would talk it through with*  
35  
36 *them you would help them and y'know I suppose the caring side does come through*  
37  
38 *love your neighbour as yourself (Participant 4)*  
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43 The narratives that participants espoused about being forgiven, redemption, being changed  
44  
45 through God and leading good lives through God also has key links to desistance-based  
46  
47 narratives. Thus, allowing prisoners to portray "good selves" can lead to enacting or "living"  
48  
49 those roles as people tend to act in line with the stories they present about themselves  
50  
51 (Blagden et al. 2014; Friestad, 2012; McAdams, 2013). The Christian principle of  
52  
53 benevolence and helping others meant that many participants were in peer support roles,  
54  
55 which in and of itself may assist with the desistance process. Peer-support roles have been  
56  
57 found to assist with desistance-based narratives and contribute to self-determination and  
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3 “active citizenship” (Perrin, Blagden, Winder & Dillon, 2017; Perrin & Blagden, 2014).  
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5 Forgiveness is a core Christian value and it is thought that forgiveness enhances one’s  
6  
7 relationship with God and is part of carrying out “God’s plan”, (Rye et al., 2001; Macaskill  
8  
9 2007). Forgiving the self appears important in the self-change process, as forgiveness  
10  
11 narratives are future-orientated and important for the process of ‘moving on’. In research  
12  
13 by Perrin, Blagden, Winder and Dillon (2017), there was some reluctance from participants  
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15 to ‘fully’ forgive themselves, but there was a consistent theme that self-forgiveness was  
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17 important for a positive future  
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## 25 Discussion

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30 Being able to forgive oneself for a transgression can be difficult, especially for those who have  
31  
32 committed sexual offences. It is perhaps unsurprising that some turn to religion as a resource  
33  
34 for self-forgiveness (Krause, 2017). Self-forgiveness was a strong theme in the data, while  
35  
36 most participants felt that others may not forgive them, with some participants stating they  
37  
38 had not forgiven themselves, all participants believed that God had forgiven and this  
39  
40 appeared to enable self-forgiveness. While the self-forgiveness literature is contested (Fisher  
41  
42 & Exline, 2007), being able to forgive the self has been linked to positive outcomes such as  
43  
44 helping individuals with convictions to reduce shame based identities and transcend criminal  
45  
46 identities and help work towards more pro-social identities (Fisher & Exline, 2010). Research  
47  
48 has also found that self-forgiveness is related to better mental health and better physical  
49  
50 health (Krause, 2017). In this data there did appear to be limits to God’s forgiveness in that  
51  
52 repeated transgressions would not be met with forgiveness. We also found that self-  
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54 forgiveness can have unintended negative consequences. A theme from the data was of the  
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3 'confessional' and the need for repentance. In the forgiveness literature, the first step in self-  
4 forgiveness is the confrontation of denial, accepting responsibility and taking ownership of  
5 transgressions (Fisher & Exline, 2007). However, some participants described that experience  
6 as "embarrassing" and that they felt like they "were being judged all over again". This can be  
7 a shame-inducing experience, which can evoke feelings of wanting to hide and avoid  
8 responsibility; it can also impair empathy, perspective-taking and self-esteem  
9 (Blagden, Lievesley & Ware, 2016; Marshall et al. 2009). It could also lead to the  
10 internalisation of negative labels which can impair the desistance process (Maruna, et al.  
11 2004). It is interesting that the religious literature stresses accepting responsibility, while  
12 researchers within clinical forensic settings have found no evidence that accepting  
13 responsibility is related to positive outcomes or recidivism (Ware & Mann, 2012). Indeed the  
14 causal direction for responsibility-taking in individuals with convictions has been challenged  
15 (see Maruna & Mann, 2006; Ware & Mann, 2012).

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37 Being forgiven by God was an important theme for participants, as it allowed them to feel  
38 redeemed, and this allowed for the facilitation and construction of viable identities (Krause &  
39 Hayward, 2015). In this study religious narratives were doing important identity work and  
40 appeared to assist participants in distancing from negative labels such as 'sex offender' which  
41 can obstruct the desistance process (Willis, 2018). The redemptive properties of participants'  
42 religious beliefs appeared to be assisting them in creating a narrative frame whereby one  
43 becomes their 'resurrected' good self. Indeed, one of the most powerful themes in the  
44 analysis was of the resurrected and redemptive self and of how this was allowing participants  
45 to construe themselves differently. The redemptive self is a powerful motivator of change  
46 because one's identity becomes invested in this narrative of change (McAdams, 2006). In  
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3 cultural narratives, common redemptive narratives incorporate forms of Christian atonement  
4  
5 with redemption being one of the strongest themes in western culture (McAdams, 2004;  
6  
7 2006). A negative emotional event becomes the opening act in a transformative and  
8  
9 redemptive sequence. The positive ending, here, being a 'new' or 'reborn' person and being  
10  
11 redeemed by God, can become an enduring sense of positive self-transformation within the  
12  
13 identity-defining life story (McAdams, 2004). Although religious narratives are not unique to  
14  
15 Identity transformation in individuals with convictions, like other desistance-based  
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17 approaches, it has been linked to redemption, which can be construed as a negative past  
18  
19 being reconstrued as a positive (McAdams, 2006).  
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26 A further positive aspect to religious beliefs in this data was that not only did such beliefs  
27  
28 facilitate redemptive selves; they also appeared to facilitate the enacting of these selves. The  
29  
30 presentation of 'moral selves' allows for the enacting of moral selves, and individuals tend to  
31  
32 live up the 'stories' they tell about themselves (McAdams, 2006; Presser & Kurth, 2009).  
33  
34 Through such narratives individuals can portray 'good selves' and assert that the person who  
35  
36 offended is not really who they are (Presser & Kurth, 2009). There were clear examples of this  
37  
38 within the participants data, not only of how they had engage with changes in self-construal,  
39  
40 but also how that was leading to them engaging in positive behaviours. Perrin and Blagden  
41  
42 (2014) have termed this "doing good being good".  
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48 However, while there were clear positives in terms of how Christian beliefs were facilitating  
49  
50 forgiveness and redemption one needs to also be mindful of the potential 'shadow' or 'risky'  
51  
52 side to religion. Some studies have argued that, in narrative terms, Religion could also work  
53  
54 to rationalise and justify offending behaviour and this may have criminogenic properties. In  
55  
56 particular some have argued that it can contribute to cognitive distortions that facilitate crime  
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3 (Knabb, Welsh & Graham-Howard, 2012; Saradjian & Nobus, 2003; Topalli, Brezina &  
4  
5 Bernharddt, 2013), or facilitate the creation of an 'excuse syntax' (Pollock & Hashmall, 1991).  
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7  
8 It may be that religion is protective when taken with other factors such as belonging to a  
9  
10 group, family, having a partner.  
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### 15 **Implications for Practice**

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Therapists working with individuals with sexual convictions can find religious beliefs difficult to manage or work with, as often they are wary of triggering a complaint of religious prejudice, unsure as to whether they are dealing with a sincerely held belief and/or an offence-supportive attitude (or both). At times individuals convicted of sexual offences' beliefs about religion are misattributed as cognitive distortions or excuses for justifying offending (Saradjian & Nobus, 2003). Such confusion surrounding the understanding of religious beliefs can lead to difficulties in challenging such attitudes or beliefs due to lack of awareness and education about the religion in question or give rise to scepticism about any religious belief. However, it is also important for clinicians to appreciate the positives that religion and religious beliefs are having for the individual and how these could be complimenting protective factors such as belonging to a group and crucially positive shifts in identity (Johnson & Jang, 2011; Roberts & Starcer, 2016). While religion alone may not be enough to change participants identities, it appears it can assist with desistance narratives (Kewley et al. 2017). Furthermore its assistance with cognitive transformation (change narratives), belonging to a group are all protective factors for individuals with sexual convictions (Farmer, McAlinden & Maruna, 2015). Assisting individuals move away from negative labels that can undermine the desistance process is important both individually and clinically (Willis, 2017). Consequently, it

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2  
3 is important that therapists are educated about religious beliefs and become religiously  
4  
5 literate so that they can understand, encourage, or challenge as appropriate. It is equally  
6  
7 important that chaplains are brought into the treatment picture as they are best placed to  
8  
9 educate therapists, but also best placed to manage and address the expectations of the  
10  
11 religious offenders and deal with offence supportive beliefs that are hooked onto an  
12  
13 individual's religious beliefs.  
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### 20 **Limitations of research**

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23 The research was conducted with a self-selected group of religious (Christian) participants;  
24  
25 these participants were likely to be some of the more committed religious Christians, and the  
26  
27 data were potentially skewed. That said, if there is an impact of religion on reoffending or  
28  
29 desistance, then it remains useful to understand individuals who self-identify as Christian in  
30  
31 beliefs and behaviour. An additional limitation of the research was that detailed offence  
32  
33 information was not collated. It was decided that requesting this information would be  
34  
35 detrimental to the researcher-participant interaction and would potentially skew the  
36  
37 participant in spending time justifying their offences. The participants were all Christian and  
38  
39 further research is needed to see whether being a part of other faiths allows for similar  
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41 processes and the creation of adaptive identities.  
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For Peer Review Only

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 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



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32	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 another, another avenue, I was giving, I was giving love to the child'	From about 5/6 years of age was taken to Sunday School
33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42	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
43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60	11	Catholic	Various jobs including mortgage broker	'When I come to prison 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

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12	Quaker	Various including bicycle repair	'Stopped listening to God'	Religious all his life
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Table 2 *Superordinate and subordinate themes.*

<b>Superordinate Theme</b>	<b>Subordinate Theme</b>
<b>1: The Road to Redemption</b>	1.1: The Act of Forgiveness, the Act of Contrition
	1.2: Forgiving the Self
	1.3: The Resurrected and Redemptive Self

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