“Losing my religion.” An exploration of religion and spirituality in men who claim to have
desisted from sexual offending

Danielle Arlanda Harris, PhD

Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University

Alissa Ackerman, PhD

University of Washington – Tacoma

Molly Haley, BSc

San Jose State University

ABSTRACT

Much of our empirical understanding of desistance from general crime emphasizes the value of informal social bonds. The specific elements of social control that are most often discussed are committed relationships, and fulfilling employment. The impact of religion and spirituality on desistance from crime has been studied to a much lesser extent, and has so far been entirely neglected in studies of individuals convicted of sexual crime. This study contributes to a growing interest in understanding the process of de-escalation and desistance from sexual offending in adult men. To that end, we examined the life history interviews of 71 men convicted of sexual offenses and released to the community to explore the presence and relevance of religiosity and spirituality in their lives. We focus specifically on four features of religion that emerged spontaneously during the interviews: emotional regulation, forgiveness, social bonds, and ritual.

Losing my Religion: An exploration of religion and spirituality in men who claim to have desisted from sexual offending

For decades, the field of research into sexual aggression has focused largely on recidivism. This mirrors the practical emphasis in all arms of the criminal justice system as well as in the therapeutic agencies that provide services to the (mostly) men convicted of sexual offenses in the United States. The prevalent (but erroneous) assumption that this population will inevitably reoffend has informed the development of a number of recent initiatives as well as the passage of increasingly restrictive laws. These include: stricter sentencing guidelines (with longer mandatory minimum terms) ; treatment and management regimes that extend periods of community supervision (sometimes indefinitely) ; as well as various pieces of memorial legislation—named for victims of especially heinous crimes—that require lifetime registration, community notification, and residence restrictions (Terry & Ackerman, 2015).

While these laws have flourished, two centuries of criminological research (Laws & Ward, 2011) and decades of psychological study of sexual offending (Gobbels, Ward, & Willis, 2012) consistently show that risk declines with age and that almost all men convicted of sexual offenses—like those who commit general crime—eventually stop offending over time (Harris, 2014; Laws & Ward, 2011; Willis, Levenson, & Ward, 2010). What *does* distinguish these offenders, is the way they are treated at all stages of the criminal justice system. This is especially clear with respect to how they are managed upon release (Harris, 2015; Harris 2016). The field of research on sexual offending has recently begun to explore the causes and correlates of desistance in this population. This line of inquiry has so far revealed a clear chasm between

what we know about sexual offending and what we do to the individuals who are convicted of those crimes. Since the early 1990s, broad and sweeping legislation in the United States has proliferated. As of mid-year 2016, over 851,000 individuals were listed on public sex offender registries. Fewer than 20% of these individuals are designated as high risk, sexually violent, or recidivists (Ackerman, Harris, Levenson & Zgoba, 2011). This is consistent with what the literature tells us – that individuals who commit sex crimes are not highly likely to reoffend and most will desist naturally (Harris, 2014). Residence restrictions that mandate how close individuals with sex crimes convictions can live from places where children congregate has relegated many registered people into homelessness (Levenson, Ackerman, Socia, & Harris, 2015). The general desistance literature shows that stable housing, employment, and prosocial relationships are keys to successful reentry (La Vigne, Davies, Palmer, & Halberstadt, 2008), but there is little to no acknowledgement in the general criminological literature regarding this particular community. Similarly, while there have been studies that address the collateral consequences of sex crime policies on registered individuals (Levenson & Cotter, 2005a; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008; Tewksbury, 2004; Tewksbury 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000) and how they might influence recidivism (Ackerman & Sacks, 2012; Levenson, Ackerman, & Harris, 2014), no study to date has addressed how religion and/or spirituality might aid in desistance for men convicted of sex crimes.

The purpose of this paper is to attend to these knowledge gaps by contributing to the little that is known about religion and sexual offending. We specifically examine the extent to which

men who are desisting from crime experience, practice, adhere to, or are impacted by their religiosity and spirituality.

Our theoretical understanding of desistance (especially that which is housed in criminology) has emphasized the pursuit and achievement of informal social controls such as marital-type relationships and fulfilling, paid employment. These elements are external to the individual and have been found to account for continuity and change in offending over time (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Recent work on men released from custody after serving time for sexual offenses has mostly underscored the difficulties and obstacles they face in meeting these kinds of goals. Religious and/or spiritual practice, however, are internal and much more personal variables. Recent work has concluded that although desistance from sexual offending is a typical outcome, it does not transpire as a result of external social controls (Harris, 2015; Harris & Laws, 2017). In fact, desistance appears to transpire *in spite of* the inability to find stable work or a partner (Harris, 2015; Harris, 2016). One possible explanation for this success is one which emphasizes a much more internal and personal transformation. We propose that these individuals might find hope or peace through faith and that is what drives their desistance.

Religion and Crime.

A small body of work which Cullen (2012) has referred to the as the “criminology of religion” has so far been concerned with understanding the role that religion and religiosity play in the initial commission of an offense. This literature tends to focus on the effect on crime of rates of church membership and attendance in certain neighborhoods (Sturgis & Baller, 2012; Evans, Cullen, Dunaway, & Burton, 1995). The lack of interest in religion (relative to other

agents of informal social control) has been attributed by Cullen (2012) to an observation that “criminology is a secular humanist profession in which faith is marginalized” (p. 153). The consideration of desistance in this limited body of knowledge is therefore relatively new, and we believe, noteworthy.

Religion and Desistance from Crime.

Some research now suggests that spirituality and active participation in religion can contribute to ending a person’s criminal career. Although empirical studies are scarce, there is a general consensus that religiosity is negatively correlated with crime (Adorjan & Chui, 2012; Giordano, Longmore, Shroeder, & Seffrin, 2008; Pirutinsky, 2014; Shroeder & Frana, 2009). Furthermore, it has been suggested that as a person becomes more religious, they become less likely to commit future crime (Pirutinsky, 2014). Like much criminological research, most studies on the potential deterrent or “desistant” effect of religion do not distinguish between crime types and are typically limited to minor delinquency and drug-related offending (Giordano, et al., 2008; Hirschi & Stark, 1969; Pirutinsky, 2014; Ulmer, 2012). The literature suggests that the majority of individuals who commit sexual offenses are generalist in their offending patterns and are not specialized “sex offenders” (Harris, 2008; Lussier, et al., 2005). Given that there are more similarities than differences between offenders, it is likely that religion acts as a “desistant” effect for this group of individuals, too.

The impact of religion and spirituality have not yet appeared in the study of desistance from sex offending. In fact, only a few empirical studies of desistance from sexual offending exist so far (e.g.: Farmer, Beech & Ward, 2011; Harris, 2014; Harris, 2015; Harris, 2016) and

none have formally considered the impact on or relevance for desistance of one's belief or investment in religion. A deeper understanding of the relevance of religion, the opportunity to practice one's faith and attend church, and the more general experience of spirituality in men convicted of sexual offenses is lacking and necessary.

We need to first define and operationalize what is meant by religiosity and spirituality to characterize the mechanisms at play in this relationship. Evidently, these phenomena are complex and there are many components of religion that might influence desistance and of course, co-occur with other elements of social control (Evans, et. al, 1995). For the purposes of the present paper, we focus specifically on four features of religion that emerged based on our reading of the literature. These four elements are: emotional regulation (or "religious coping"); forgiveness/redemption; social bonds/connectedness; and ritual/routine. Below, we describe the literature supporting each element, and hypothesize the extent to which it might be relevant for men convicted of sexual offenses.

Emotional Regulation. Many people with criminal convictions report having experienced overwhelmingly negative emotions, such as hopelessness, low self-esteem, and anger. Further, whether or not they are formally diagnosed, the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and paranoia are also fairly common among samples of criminally involved persons (Shroeder & Frana, 2009). It has also been found that emotional dysregulation, especially when left untreated, can perpetuate offending (Shroeder & Frana, 2009). Those individuals who have committed sexual offenses are not exempt from experiencing these negative emotions. Research suggests high rates of co-occurring psychiatric and psychological problems and mental health concerns for this population (Ahlmeyer,

Kleinsasser, Stoner, & Retzlaff, 2003).

One of the most profound ways that religion can affect a person appears to be within the realm of emotional regulation. Emotional regulation is also referred to as “religious coping” (Ulmer, 2012) in the religion literature, and describes the phenomenon of looking to God for strength, support, and guidance to understand and manage difficult or negative emotions and adverse life circumstances (Adorjan & Chui, 2012; Reisig et al., 2012; Shroeder & Frana, 2009).

One’s belief in religion can provide tools to navigate negative emotions such as anger, depression, and low self-esteem. It makes sense then, that these tools might be especially important to criminal justice system-involved individuals who might struggle to overcome certain obstacles in their lives. For example, those who engage in criminal behavior might do so as a result of lacking the resources to seek counselling for difficult situations. Indeed, entire theories of criminology propose that emotional strain and feelings such as anger or fear account for a great deal of crime and criminality (Agnew, 1992). It follows then, that without proper channels to manage their emotions, offenders can have a harder time adjusting to normal life. Thus, they would be more likely to cope by responding to such strains by relying on controlled substances, engaging in risky behaviors, or resorting to crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Shroeder & Frana, 2009).

In Shroeder and Frana’s (2009) study, respondents with positive religious experiences typically focused on the strong emotional benefits they received from practicing religion. They particularly mentioned how it changed their lives for the better and helped them through tough times. The experience of positive emotions specifically, including peace of mind and hope for the future

have been shown to alleviate especially negative emotions. In their study, when offenders found religion, it gave them a sense of calm and positivity that helped them to overcome the emotional hurdles they faced. Similarly, in Johnson and Jang's (2012) conceptualization of "religious coping," it is thought that religion might insulate individuals who face great strain and who might otherwise turn to crime.

This strain can endure long after the commission of a sexual offense. For example, those convicted of sex offenses face many barriers upon reentry and report high levels of stress and anger in association with their placement on the publically available sex offender registry (Ackerman & Sacks, 2012; Ackerman, Sacks & Osier, 2013). In a study of 228 men convicted of sexual offenses in three states, Ackerman and Sacks (2012) found support for Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory (1992) as it relates to self-reported recidivism among men convicted of sex crimes who are on public registries. A subsequent paper reviewed the qualitative comments provided by 60 respondents. In that study, 11 respondents (18.3%) expressed that they were struck with anger, hopelessness, and despair when they thought about their futures. Johnson and Jang's (2012) concept of religious coping is especially relevant then for individuals convicted of sex offenses, as they face significantly more strain and hopelessness than general offenders.

Forgiveness/Redemption. A great deal of religious teachings, especially those which stem from Christianity, emphasizes the power and importance of forgiveness (McCullough, Pargamont, & Thorensen, 2000). It makes sense that this theme would resonate particularly strongly for people who have committed especially serious crimes or transgressed deeply entrenched social norms.

Giordano and others (2012) have described the kind of profound identity transformation that occurs when someone seeks redemption and achieves forgiveness. This transformation is said to signal the start of a new life for them (Giordano et al., 2012; Shroeder & Frana, 2009). A final component of this internalization of values is that prosocial behaviors are encouraged and a greater sense of empathy towards others is fostered. Maruna's (2001) redemption script demonstrates a good example of this for general offending so again, we expect it will also resonate for individuals who have been convicted of sexual crimes.

It is important to note that in the current political and social landscape (especially in the United States), such a process is largely impossible for those who have been labelled as "sexually dangerous persons" or "sexually violent predators." It is a commonly held belief that all individuals convicted of sexual offenses are untreatable (Willis, et al., 2010). The added label of "dangerous" or "predator" only further fuels the incendiary public perceptions about these individuals (Jenkins, 1998; LaFond, 2005). It is unsurprising then that once labeled, many individuals convicted of sexual offenses believe these very negative assumptions about themselves (Becker, 1963) and begin to internalize those beliefs. While redemption and forgiveness are of value, we acknowledge that it is unlikely that individuals who have been labeled as "sex offenders" or "sexually violent predators" will ever be able to attain such transformation.

Social Bonds/Connectedness. Perhaps one of the most valuable byproducts of religious involvement is the opportunity to engage meaningfully in one's community, develop social bonds, and build prosocial stakes in conformity (Adorjan & Chui, 2012; Evans, et al., 1995; Giordano et al.,

2008; Pirutinsky, 2014; Reisig et al., 2012; Shroeder & Frana, 2009). It has been argued that faith, generally, (and one's participation in religious activities, specifically), can help people create new (or strengthen existing) bonds with family and friends, as well as with conventional society more broadly (Adorjan & Chui, 2012; Evans, et al., 1995; Reisig et al., 2012; Shroeder & Frana, 2009). To be sure, identifying oneself as a member of a community and interacting with co-believers is an especially meaningful component of religion (Ulmer, 2012). This component of religion approximates the "attachment" component of Hirschi's (1969) theory of social control.

Incarceration separates individuals with criminal convictions from their families, both physically and emotionally. When they are released from custody, they often lack the resources to mend or repair those relationships, much less begin new, positive ones. Their ties to the outside world are ruptured by the experience of a prison sentence and the "otherness" label that is imposed upon them. Many individuals leaving custody report having been exposed to religion during their sentence through visiting ministers and chaplains with whom they might form a positive relationship (Giordano et al., 2008). In a place where social bonds and connections are few and far between, as well as difficult to foster and navigate, these visitors can have a significant impact on a person's life and outlook. It follows that these religious figures can help offenders desist by giving them encouragement, support, and something to believe in (Adorjan & Chui, 2012).

Religious involvement can open doors to new friendships and prosocial, interpersonal connections. Practicing religion with co-believers can help foster and maintain ties to the community as well as provide attachment to prosocial and law abiding people and institutions (Adorjan & Chui,

2012; Evans et al., 1995). Although family ties and social capital are often regarded as the main drivers of desistance (Adorjan & Chui, 2012; Pirutinsky, 2014), in this example, it is clear that religion can be a proxy, or at least, a vehicle for the delivery of those benefits, especially in case where the attainment of social capital has been compromised. It follows then, that forming positive bonds with others can perpetuate the prosocial beliefs and behaviors needed to ultimately desist from crime (Giordano et al., 2008; Pirutinsky, 2014). Again, we doubt the extent to which these components are possible or even present for sexual offending samples because their presence in protective custody or their label in prison might prevent them from help-seeking.

Routine/ritual. Perhaps, at the most basic level, the greatest power of religious practice might simply be the provision of ritual and routine in one's day-to-day life. In this way, church-going, for example, can directly impact a person by serving as a distraction from difficult experiences (Shroeder & Frana, 2009), and an opportunity for human connection. At a fundamental level though, it is quite simply something to do. One of the many challenges that we have observed in men returning to the community is literally filling their days. In many cases, they face so many restrictions on their movement that they have great difficulty finding work or pursuing an education. Supervised release often amounts to little more than house arrest where the constant charging and maintenance of their GPS unit and restrictions on their residence and activities, location and movement preclude them from anything beyond attending treatment and weekly grocery shopping. Going to church offers them a destination and something to do when they get there.

Subsequently, what might begin as simple routine might then develop into involving

individuals to generate social capital by building their own prosocial ties with local networks or charities. Although we acknowledge that each of these four elements of religion are interconnected, and likely coexist in a symbiotic way, the element of routine/ritual is intended here to capture the sheer notion of time and how time is spent (much like Hirschi's (1969) social bond of "involvement").

A note on religion as a criminogenic variable. A lingering concern in the discussion of religion and crime is the use of the former to justify or absolve one's responsibility for the latter. There certainly exists the phenomenon whereby individuals might "abuse religion to rationalize their deviance" (Johnson & Jang, 2012, p. 122). To be sure, religion has long been used to provide excuses that vindicate or even condone a person's actions (Giordano et al., 2012; Pirutinsky, 2014). Examples include but are not limited to: prisoner radicalization where institutions are seen as incubators for religious extremism; acts of terrorism committed in the name of a particular God; crimes committed by a specific church or religious body such as harboring an offender, concealing an offense, or obstruction of justice; or delusional schizophrenics who claim their hallucinations have compelled them to perform God's will (Hamm, 2012). Although fascinating, these examples are well beyond the scope of the current work.

The emphasis in our interview protocol was squarely on the individual's post release experiences. Although their self-reported offending and their pathways to those behaviors were often discussed, they were not systematically or routinely probed. Further, we deliberately diverted our focus from their explanations, rationalizations, and justifications of offending, privileging instead the

way they talked about their current lives, their experience of reentry and the challenges of desistance. No one reported having offended in a religious context and no participants blamed their offending on religion, explicitly. The complicated relationship between the Catholic Church and the phenomenon of sexual abuse in particular, deserves much more attention than what can be provided here. Again, rather than investigate the role of religion in the initial commission of an offense, we are focused here on its role, if any, on desistance and pathways out of crime. As will be discussed below, it should be noted that some men recalled being abused by priests or elders of the Catholic Church.

The present study. Given our knowledge gaps regarding religiosity and desistance, the present study was intended to be largely exploratory. We did ultimately hypothesize that the experience of religion and spirituality might be a contributing factor in the sample's self-reported desistance from sexual offending in the same or similar way that individuals who desist from regular offending find religion useful or comforting. As mentioned earlier, this line of inquiry was also inspired by the observation that they indeed desisted but were doing so in spite of having no access to social bonds and no clear pathway to cognitively transform away from the persistent "sex offender" label.

The men were asked about their religious views, church attendance, and self-described spirituality as part of a larger interview about their life history. The Life History Interview Protocol (McAdams, 1993), includes questions about their hopes, fears, beliefs, and experiences. At a very basic level, we might have hypothesized that the men who were doing the 'best' or had been 'crime

free' the longest were the most religious, or that religiosity might increase as months since release increased, but these measures would be considerably subjective and we simply do not have reliable scales with which to measure these constructs. Instead, we conducted thematic content analysis on their responses to ascertain the extent to which religion was considered an important element of social control, or a significant force for their individual process of community reentry and desistance from sexual offending.

METHOD

Participants. The 71 men included in the study were drawn from a large sample of men interviewed over a period of three years in the Northeastern United States. The men were disproportionately (88%) white and somewhat older (mean age = 53 years) than other criminal samples. All of the men had served a custodial sentence for a sexual offense and had been released into the community at least six months prior to the interview. We defined the sample as “desisters” based simply upon the absence of any self-reported offending since their most recent release. This time period ranged from 9 months to 22 years (average = 4.3 years).

Procedure. The men were informed of the study and invited to participate by their therapists during a group session of their court ordered sex offender specific treatment program. First names and contact numbers of interested individuals were then forwarded to the researchers and individual interviews were scheduled. The interviews took approximately 90 minutes and followed the Life History Interview Protocol originally developed by McAdams (1993) and later adjusted for use with sex offenders by Laws and Ward (2011). The interview contained a specific prompt about religion

and spirituality. In addition, they participants were asked an open ended question about how and why they think they stopped offending. All participants consented to having their individual interview audio-recorded and the study received the approval of the university's Institutional Review Board.

Analytical Strategy. Our original approach involved coding the responses to those specific questions but we soon realized that the men also mentioned religion and spirituality to different degrees throughout the interview. For example, one man spoke of his time in a Catholic orphanage when asked about the low point of his life. Some men mentioned having been abused by priests when they were children. Still others spoke at length about finding religion while in custody. This led to a much more thorough review of the entire transcript, for every participant, by all coders. We then extracted any mention of religion, spirituality, and church, for example, and arranged those mentions into the themes described above.

RESULTS

This particular study is one of a series of projects that examines a range of variables that might influence or impact desistance from sexual offending. We initially coded a broad selection of variables into scales and created continuous variables for a quantitative, descriptive analysis. These continuous variables included: age, sentence length, total time spent in custody, most recent time served, time since offense, time since release, number of charges, total time employed, and so on. It is worth noting that the only relationship that reached statistical significance for the sample was the positive correlation between cumulative time spent in prison and self-reported religiosity (Harris, 2016).

The results are presented in two sections. First, we present a general overview of the self-reported religiosity of the sample, including their self-described religious affiliations, and the frequency with which they practice. Second, we discuss the themes that emerged spontaneously. We arrange these emergent themes into the four elements outlined above. We use our analysis of these themes to comment on the importance of religion in the lives of men who claim to have desisted from sexual offending.

As a whole, the sample was not particularly devout with only two fifths (39%, $n = 28$) reporting that they regularly attended church and a much smaller proportion (14%, $n = 10$) saying that they prayed regularly. Some of the quotes about religious involvement are provided below:

I have a regiment of prayers that I say... I pray twice a day. (A5)

I go to church. I do my rosary. (A2)

I do say my prayers every night, before I go to sleep. Thank God for that I had a nice day, a safe day, a peaceful day. (A20)

The modal religion was Catholic (41.6%, $n = 30$) or Christian (15%, $n = 11$) and a relatively large number (17%, $n = 12$) identified as Atheist or Agnostic. Other religions that were represented in the sample included: Born Again Christian, Buddhist, Baptist, Jehovah's Witness, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and Wiccan. It should be noted that the strong representation of Catholics is likely an artefact of the geographic location of the study and the ethnic composition of the cities where the interviews were conducted. A strong theme emerged of having been raised Catholic but later leaving the church. 13 men (18%) recalled especially difficult experiences with their Catholic childhoods:

I tell people I was raised in a cult: Catholicism. They all wore black and they beat you with rulers and you used to spend endless hours on your knees. (D10)

I remember one point being kicked out of Catholic Church because I kept questioning [them]...finally, this uh, higher up bishop or whatever in the Catholic Church said “uh, I need you to leave.” (B22)

I was born a catholic, but...I can't honestly say that I'm a catholic any longer. (D1)

Further, a substantial proportion of the sample claimed to be survivors of sexual abuse and in multiple instances, the identified perpetrator was a Catholic priest or church elder. As mentioned above, the history of the Catholic Church and the phenomenon of child sexual abuse is complicated and beyond the scope of this study¹. It was also not an explicit area of interest during data collection, so while it might be intriguing to draw some conclusions here, it would be premature.

The next section of results refer specifically to the four elements of religion noted earlier. We explored the mentions of each element to comment on the extent to which the men would attribute their desistance to any of these benefits in particular, or to simply articulate how religion had helped them, if at all, in their return to the community. Interestingly, and unlike some general offenders, no one attributed their desistance specifically to “finding God” or to any kind of religious conversion. Rather, the benefits of religion were more often implied from their descriptions of other experiences upon release.

Emotional Regulation/Religious Coping. The first and most commonly expressed benefit

¹ Interested readers are referred elsewhere for more detail on this phenomenon: Terry, K.J. (2008). Stained Glass: The Nature and Scope of Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*. 35(5): 549-569.; Terry, K.J. (2015) Child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church: a review of global perspectives, *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 39, 139-154.

of religion was its provision of “comfort” during difficult times. Six men spoke of finding peace and hope during times of depression and described benefiting from the kind of emotional regulation that they felt religion provided:

There was times where I was struggling there [in custody], and I would pray, and then all of a sudden something weird would happen, something good would happen... You know, so I mean, I mean it did help a lot. (C15)

The Bible gives me a hope for a time when things will be different, where there's an opportunity for a paradise condition.... by sticking to those Christian values I stand the best chance of achieving that. (A4)

My pastor... I like him because he's biblically orientated. In counseling, if there's any problem, finances or whatever, what does the Bible say? So we go to the Bible. You can believe in it or not believe in it, that's up to you as an individual, but he is my greatest influence, though. (B20)

Related to the concept of religious coping and emotional regulation is the emergent theme of self-control. The impact of religion on self-control has been discussed at length elsewhere (Kerley, Copes, Tewksbury, & Dabney, 2011; Klanjsek, Vazsonyi, & Trejos-Castillos, 2012; Laird, Marks, & Marrero, 2010; Pirutinsky, 2014). For example, Pirutinsky (2014) has alleged that religion's strongest contribution towards desistance is its impact on impulsivity and self-control. Five men in the sample were explicit about how their relationship with God or their willingness to pray is what “keeps them in check.”

So I made a decision to go back, to the religion I left, because in reality it was a moral safeguard, in reality it was the best place, safest place for me to be...(A4)

It keeps me thinking the right way. No wrong thinking. (D4)

It influenced a lot of things, I think part of the no alcohol, no um, no smoking no drugs kind of thing um, came for there so it was sort of engrained there. (A9)

The “Hellfire Effect.” Although we aim to take a more optimistic perspective of desistance research and focus in this paper on explaining the positive aspects of religion, we did

see evidence of the “Hellfire effect” (Hirschi & Stark, 1969). Rather than emphasizing the positive ways in which religion might help one to desist, this theme instead emphasizes the powerful deterrent effect of fear of “supernatural sanctions” or eternal damnation:

If I do anything stupid, he won't forgive me for it, so I try to keep it on a positive level. (B5)

I was going through my religion, through the bible, I can't go to heaven if I commit suicide, that's one of the biggest sins, so that prevents me from doing that. (B20)

Forgiveness/redemption. The notion that church was a place where people see the good in one another was a strong theme. In the rare instances in which forgiveness was described it was often done so in a very personal or private way:

The pastor was such a good guy... he says what's in your heart is in your heart; you don't have to go show anybody. (C15)

More often, we found evidence of the opposite condition, that is, the belief that their conviction was utterly irreversible and unforgivable. They expressed a sense of loss and despair.

I cannot look forward with hope and I cannot look back with pride. I'm just existing. I'm just existing. (D7)

It is difficult to live with what I did. And I can't take it back and I can't apologize. I cannot contact the victims. I hate what I did and it's very painful, but I can't pretend that it didn't happen and I can't walk away from that. (D5)

There was nothing they could do and they had no chance for redemption. They frequently identified specific friends or family members who *hadn't* forgiven them or would *never* forgive them and in some cases, agreed that their crimes were irredeemable.

As far as I know, my children think I'm dead (B10)

Even for the men who self-identified as devout, the intractable nature of their offense continued to be front and center in their lives. They felt there was no way to ever let it go:

I consider myself a Christian. But it does not affect the consequences of what I did. That is with me until they bury me. (B20)

This theme of having no way out is consistent with Maruna's (2016) recent remarks that society, more broadly, is at a "loss for words" when it comes to the rehabilitation of men convicted of sexual offenses in that there is no "redemption script" available for them. This is not the case for other ex-convicts. For example: a heroin addict can be in recovery; an alcoholic can be sober; an ex-gang member can write children's books about the dangers of street violence (Williams, 2004) and an ex-con man and fraudster can become employed by the FBI (Abagnale, 1980). This is not an option for the men in our sample.

Social Bonds/Connectedness. Although it was rare, when present, the instant community provided by religious practice emerged as a strong theme. The men were especially descriptive about feeling welcome at certain congregations and having reconnected with old friends or made new ones:

I joined the church when, while I was going through the divorce. I, it, I felt more welcome there. (B14)

At an LDS church, you're gonna get greeted; someone is gonna talk to you (B22)

That's where I met [my best friend], and he was very religious, and he's been helping me all along (A20)

Routine/ritual. Some men reported finding religion fairly late in life, usually while they were in custody:

I go to church, I didn't in the past, I started when I was in prison, think I was 55 when I realized I may never leave prison alive but maybe I can help somebody else along the way, so I had to go to church (A20)

Three years ago I joined the Buddhist group here and that's been every positive. In fact we were able to get the Dali Lama's second on the dial to come in and it was great. (D6)

This element of routine and ritual combines Hirschi's (1969) bonds of attachment and involvement. They often admitted that the initial impetus for this involvement might have been the routine of something to do, but it later become social.

I went to church and bible study in jail, it was just something to do and they were good people and positive people. (B9)

A second theme that emerged was the desire to "get serious" after a catastrophic event. We did not see any particularly dramatic "turnaround" stories where men described religious turning points or transformative experiences while in custody, but unexpectedly, they could usually pinpoint when and where their interest in religious was piqued.

I went to church on the streets but I never took it serious. Now I want to be serious with the man up there. I talk to the pastor now. (D10)

In prison, I did the turnaround. I read the Bible, and now I consider myself a Christian. (B20)

Obstacles to practicing religion. Without question, the strongest theme to emerge spontaneously as the men described their spirituality and experiences or practicing religion was not the advantages offered, but the barriers that they faced in going to church. Some men expressed a desire to practice their faith but, for various reasons, were not allowed. A particularly strong emergent theme of obstacles to participating in one's religion was observed.

I just started going to church again. But I had to go through some stuff to make sure I could go because I can't be around kids and stuff like that. (B24)

I can go to church if I get an "okay" from the pastor or minister or whatever. If I get an "okay" from them that I told them my charges, and they're gonna put me in a seat where there ain't no young children around or nothing like that (B23)

I'd like to go to the Seventh Day Adventist Church in [nearby town]. However, every time I go there it seems like I end up getting in trouble. (B12)

DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that active involvement in a church, or quite simply, belief in religion can have a positive impact on a person's social relationships upon reentry to the community. It is also clear that it is not religion, necessarily, that makes the difference, but the "side effects" or byproducts of social connectedness and emotional regulation that can have the most profound impact on building social capital during the reentry process. Of course, religion alone is not sufficient to effect or encourage desistance but it certainly holds promise as a vehicle for the delivery of social bonds. Initially, and perhaps most importantly, it can provide a prosocial routine activity for the severely disenfranchised and disadvantaged population of men returning to the community after a custodial sentence. For men whose post release behavior and movements are so profoundly limited and supervised so thoroughly, active participation in a church is a positive and achievable first step. With the utilitarian goal of everybody's safety, it is necessary and possible to encourage this.

A clear recommendation for policy is to revisit and repeal the regulations that restrict church attendance. As has been demonstrated, there *are* models in which houses of worship have developed safe, secure, and mutually agreeable ways to open their doors to allow *all* individuals to attend. One such example is the Urban Grace Church in Tacoma, Washington (n.d.). The church provides a publicly available "Covenant with a Sex Offender" to manage risk while also providing ministry to all people. An additional rationale for such a suggestion is the observation that most of the other more typical elements of informal social control (employment, romantic relationships, and so on) are, at least initially, largely beyond the reach of our sample.

We agree with Ulmer's (2012) characterization that religion's "influence is likely holistic, simultaneously affecting the whole social person" (p. 168). One of our great challenges as social scientists is the isolation of our variables of interest. Desistance, like recidivism, and indeed the initial commission of a crime is a complex phenomenon in which a number of constructs are interacting simultaneously. As Cullen (2012) deftly noted: "the effect of religion is overshadowed by that of other groups, such as the family, peer group, and school" (p. 151) (see also: Gorsuch, 1984). Although we can hypothesize that one element of informal social control might be more powerful than another, so long as our research is conducted in the social world and not in a chemistry lab, we will never know for sure. Religion's positive value might best be described as tightly interwoven with other constructs, but when it is all one has, it behooves us to help make it available. Indeed, the men in the sample who 'had religion' had nothing else.

Limitations. In addition to our inability to isolate variables and measure the impact of religiosity separate from other types of informal social bonds and controls, we must acknowledge two other points of bias. The first limitation concerns the interview protocol and the second is a product of sample bias. We discuss both in turn.

The men were specifically asked to "describe their religious beliefs in a nutshell" and, depending on their response, a number of follow up questions were also asked. Although everyone was invited to elaborate, it should be noted that this particular question came right at the end of the interview. Most interviews ran well over 90 minutes and focused heavily on the darkest and most difficult periods in their lives. Therefore, it is understandable that by the end of the conversation,

both the interviewer and interviewee were often emotionally exhausted. Those for whom religion served as a source of good in their lives were very descriptive and effusive about its impact. Similarly, at the other end of the continuum, the men who were negatively triggered by a question about religion and felt urged to share their abusive experiences were also quite verbose. The unavoidable bias that we are left with, therefore, is that our results focus in the direction of religion as both an extremely useful coping mechanism and as a source of trauma and abuse in their lives.

Second, we observed that our sample included an overrepresentation of men with educational deficits or learning difficulties. Our results illustrate the limited cognitive capacity of the participants which restrict our ability to provide terribly in depth discussions of their interpretation of religion and its meaning in their lives. These limitations require that our conclusions be interpreted with caution. Given the dearth of available research on the relationship between religion and desistance from sexual offending, however, we believe our findings to be valuable and noteworthy.

Conclusion. For the men who aligned themselves with a particular religion, that faith was often expressed to be a source of positivity in their lives. We have categorized the vast and varied variables of religion here into four elements: emotional regulation/religious coping, forgiveness/redemption, social bonds/connectedness, and routine/ritual. Certainly, for some people, religion best serves as a vehicle for the development of self-control (through routine and ritual) or for the achievement of social capital (by providing a community of like-minded peers and co-believers). Regardless, this means that more research regarding the exact nature of religion's relationship with desistance from crime is necessary. We also hope that we have contributed more

generally to criminology's interest in and similarities with theology (Sarre, 2016). There is a long history of punishment and prison being enmeshed with the themes of religion, atonement, and forgiveness. Honoring this historical legacy has the potential to answer tough questions regarding the mechanisms for desistance from sexual offending.

In closing, religiosity and spirituality were experienced to varying extents by the men in our sample. For the most part though, their beliefs and desires to practice were hindered by what we consider to be unnecessary obstacles. Punishing offenders beyond their sentence with stigmatizing shame and discrimination clearly does more harm than good. Further, providing little or no useful education or training in custody leaves individuals ill-prepared for life after incarceration. Our results indicate that actively preventing potentially fulfilling participation in church further isolates an already disenfranchised population. If our goal is to enable meaningful integration into their communities, we recommend that allowing appropriate religious practice is a venerable first step.

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