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Religion and conversion as a resource of correctional treatment

Abstract: The author presents scholarly literature which examines the topic of religion and faith in rehabilitation and in transformation of identity. In the context of correctional treatment we can talk about religion as a force for positive change. The author concludes by suggesting that conversion might assist incarcerated people to avoid recidivism and substance abuse, and perhaps, find or believe in satisfying and meaningful lives.

Key words: Religion, conversion, correctional treatment.

Introduction

A review of scientific literature on the teleology of social rehabilitation, reintegration and social inclusion of behaviorally impaired people and criminals allows us to distinguish the most important mechanisms of human deviant behavior, such as: emotions, cognitive processes, self-esteem, empathy skills, anxiety level, sense of effectiveness, etc. and identify the most important potentials whose development becomes the goal of an intentional corrective procedure organized by educators and psychologists. The potentials include: high level of creativity, talents for sports, acting, music, personal ambition, high perseverance (important parameter of personal sense of effectiveness), ability to work together in a group, etc. Therefore, a conceptual apparatus appears which refers us to the vision of man as a physiological, psychological and/or sociological nature. Less often can one notice the vision of man as a spiritual being in the resocialization anthropology

dominated in the late modern age by anthropocentrism, empiricism and materialism. In contemporary resocialization programs, spiritual life is often confined to the area of artistic expression or reception of the works of high art. Rehabilitation assumptions in individual rehabilitation programs seem to be limited to purely scientific objectives, thus seeking their justification in the existing concepts of social sciences such as: modeling, conditioning, facilitation, self-psychocorrection. Sometimes, corrective intentions reveal the attachment to common-sense judgments (“the charge should keep an aesthetically pleasing school notebook” – I read in one of the Individual Resocialization Programs prepared at a correctional institution in Silesia). Religion, metaphysics i.e. everything that is connected with the “high-flown” teleology of life, God or worldview dilemmas, are left to “professionals” from outside of resocialization. In turn, they either organize their own infrastructure of influences (e.g. the Catholic Church participates in the organization of chapels in prisons), or they are allowed to operate in a less formal way (Jehovah’s Witnesses are very active in this area).

Religion versus crime and corrective influences

The relatively recent interest in the processes of religious experience in the scientific literature of the subject (James 1958) as well as in analysis of conversion and religion as forces through which positive changes of personality can be achieved, identity transgression initiated (*faith as a force for positive change*) (Gardner 2011, p. 22; cf. Hewitt 2006; Pamoja 2010) or even crime rates decreased (*faith can play a positive role in diminishing or mitigating crime*) (Gardner 2011, p. 26) indicates an interesting course of research that is still underdeveloped in criminological analysis and *clinical social work* (Siebold 2011). Sociologists even describe religion as a “forgotten factor” in criminological research (Johnson et al. 2000; Bainbridge 1989). Lack of proper attention to this factor is all the more astonishing since religion plays a major role in the lives of many people (Gardner 2011, p. 26). How can religion become an ally in the process of resocialization? Should educators at rehabilitation institutions pay more attention to the spiritual dimension of the lives of their charges? Is it worthwhile to support the formation of religious communities at correctional institutions? These are the questions that the following analyses are intended to address.

In recent years, American literature has been increasingly interested in the subject of faith and conversion. The US Federal Government draws attention to the importance of religion, which can play a major role as a mechanism for social control (see Pamoja 2010, p. 1529) and allocates billions of dollars to religious organizations fighting the social problems of America (addictions, homelessness, former prisoners returning to society). Religious organizations struggle with many social issues, using simple measures from the area of social work, but most of

them offer something more. They introduce their members into the world of values and build social ties between their members, establishing communities that meet the many important needs of their members (affiliative, ideological). Religion serves moral development but, in addition to the *moral reasoning theory*, the theoretical basis for explaining the relationship between *religiosity* and *criminality* are the *control theory*, the *rational choice theory* and the *arousal theory* (Ellis, Peterson 1996, p. 765).

In order to make these deliberations accurate and exact, I would like to define what I understand as “religion” and “conversion”. The first term is one of the words whose meaning range is so wide that clarification seems almost indispensable. Since the process of resocialization is about triggering internal personality changes, our analysis should concern those religious feelings (views) that have a personal (internal) nature, as opposed to the purely formal belief system or even the administrative declaration of belonging to a religious institution, which is not always accompanied by an authentic recognition or feeling of values and views propagated in such institutional structure. Therefore, I assume, following William James, understanding of religion as such feelings, deeds and experiences of an isolated individual that this individual thinks relate to something they themselves consider divine (1958, p. 30). This definition emphasizes the individual dimension of experiencing transcendence, which can play an important role in effective rehabilitation understood as a transgression of deviation identity into positive identity, under the influence of belief in the existence of the moral law of divine provenance, or under the influence of many other factors (feeling of gratitude for the mercy shown, forgiveness of guilt, discovery of the meaning of life and vocation, noticing that there is a Providence that oversees man’s life etc.). This personal experience of guilt and experienced evil, which becomes the desire for a new life, can be seen in the poem of a charge from the correctional institution in Zawiercie (facility for minors who have committed a punishable act). At this institution, poetry therapy is developing, which results in the publication of poetry volumes. The aforementioned minor expresses her transformational religious experience:

My Jesus

Behind the curtain of thorns
 My Jesus is crying to me
 I am one of those spikes
 I bleed, bleed him with glass
 I climb over his back
 Through the spine, through the neck
 I hear this skin and I hear
 Him asking, in a whisper, for strength
 This face is calling to God:

Forgive her Father!
Blood has already flooded the words
This is my lamb
Let it be healthy

Justyna Nowak (2011, p. 27)

James's perspective on religion, however, omits an important element of a religious experience which is to experience God in a community of people who share this belief. Being in a community, celebrating rituals and interacting, is a source of additional meanings and emotions that no privatized religious experience can replace. A paradigmatic example of how religion and community inextricably shape the proper framework for the transformation of identity, is the work of AA groups (*Alcoholics Anonymous*) whose members, through the process of reinterpretation of their own history using AA rhetoric (force majeure, God is the main element of this discourse), mutually support each other in staying sober (see Swora 2004, p. 189). Only in a community is it possible to celebrate religious services and give the sacraments; to awaken faith through homily, retreats, occasional religion lessons, religious chats, individual conversations, pilgrimages, sharing of active love – *Caritas* – in the form of counseling, consoling, caroling, material aid. Often, the possibility of personal participation in preparatory works for the liturgy is an introduction to cognitive and spiritual involvement, and builds a complete picture of religious experience. Entrusting a convicted person with a certain function in the performance of church services (e.g. altar server or organist) is often one of the few opportunities to present their special skills (e.g. musical abilities), which significantly increases their sense of value (Kuć 2007, pp. 147–148). The community is, in a synergetic way, conducive to the emergence of opportunities for spiritual development, which is impossible in the conditions of individual experience of one's faith.

I understand the concept of conversion as a rapid change in the worldview of an individual or group (*Słownik wyrazów obcych* 2002, p. 596), especially under the influence of a religious factor. Identity transformation can occur for various reasons. These can be positive as well as negative facts, for example marriage, but also divorce; birth and death; wealth and poverty; the prospect of imprisonment, but also leaving prison; getting addicted and overcoming an addiction, etc. (Kubiak-Krzywicka 2008, p. 155). By the way, it is worth noting that social experiences of an individual that can be characterized as social facts (death, addiction, imprisonment) act on the identity of an individual in a personalized way, dependent on the system of meanings that the individual initiates when he/she experiences them, in which the system of religious meanings plays a special role¹. As Charles

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¹ I define a social fact differently from Émile Durkheim, agreeing with him only on one feature of the social fact – its existence outside individual consciousnesses (Durkheim 2005, p. 265). Howe-

Taylor notes (2002, p. 33), often the harbinger of conversion is melancholy (lost sense of meaning) which an individual may feel as a result of processes such as migration, urbanization, loss of a support system. Surely, detention in a prison or other rehabilitation facility is an excellent cause of melancholy and therefore a favorable opportunity for conversion.

True rehabilitative potential lies only in those religious experiences that do not come only from the formal practicing of religion, mechanical participation in rituals (attending a Holy Mass) – which enriches the participant with new stimuli, otherwise valuable for people who are incarnated, who experience sensory deprivation – but this potential is hidden in the religious state of mind whose nature was captured perfectly by William James. Religion in this sense: “Like love, anger, hatred, ambition, jealousy, similar to any other instinctive reason and enthusiasm – it gives life a charm that cannot be derived rationally or logically from anything else. When this charm comes, it comes in the form of a gift of some kind – physiologists call it a gift of the body, and theologians a gift of God’s grace; we may or may not receive this gift and there are people who never experience it, just as we cannot fall in love with a woman indicated by order. Therefore, a religious feeling is a real addition to the individual’s level of life. It gives him or her a new area of power. When the external battle has been lost, when the external world renounces man, religious feeling gives him a place for it and enlivens the inner world in him, which otherwise would be a complete desert” (James 1958, pp. 45–46).

In this sense, religious feelings cannot be evoked in a potential believer in a procedurally guaranteed way. Nor should we expect that in believing, religious people there will automatically occur above-average morality, sensitivity to ethical norms, love of truth or other characteristics attributed to holy people, altruistically disposed towards others. Still, there is a number of scientific studies that explore the relationship between religiousness (identified with respect for the law, honesty, fear of God who sees everything, fear of hell) and lower crime. American research even proves that such a relationship exists (Ellis, Peterson 1996)².

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ver, I treat social experiences as social facts in an interactionist way, making their power of influence dependent on the entity who can give them various meanings, and therefore they are devoid of the characteristic that Durkheim saw in them i.e. the power of coercion with which they impose themselves on the individual. Of course, it is impossible to deny that some of the social experiences (death of a close person) are interpreted by people in a standard manner, which indicates the immanent attributes that lie in these experiences, and the ability of these social facts to impose specific meanings on us (definitions of situations). However, it is always possible to reinterpret the meaning of these facts, which is evident in a situation when someone, thanks to a religious perspective, starts looking differently at the fact that their loved one died.

² Study conducted in 13 industrial communities by Lee Ellis and James Peterson showed that more religious communities have lower crime rates than less religious ones. The negative correlation concerns especially religiosity (the indicators were: practicing religion and being a member of the church) as well as total crimes and property offenses. However, the correlation is also positive in some places i.e. religiosity may be conducive to the use of violence (personal-violent offenses). The authors

Although the activity of sects confirms the existence of mechanisms which, in a planned and even strategic way, multiply the numbers of their members who, over time and under the influence of specific practices (e.g. “brainwashing”) ascend to the highest level of commitment and resignation from one’s own goods, and even life in the name of “higher” values, I omit this area of consideration, because such results of religion are not the subject of this work. The effect of the activities of sects and various heretical branches of major religions is the process of social isolation, asociality or even antisociality in the form of hostility to infidels. Elżbieta Hałas, on the basis of an analysis of American literature in the field of sociology of conversion, concludes that there is a clear difference between a religious group having the nature of a church and the activity of sects. Main characteristics of a church are:

- compromise with the world,
- inherited participation,
- ritualism of the services provided.

A sect, on the other hand, is characterized by:

- a state of tension with the world,
- participation requiring conversion,
- highly emotional ceremonies (Hałas 2007, p. 135).

The above description of sects seems to suggest falsely that the conversion process is possible only in destructive religious groups. Meanwhile, conversion as a process of “re-birth” is a process that takes place both between Christian denominations (originally, conversion meant a transition to Catholicism from another Christian denomination) and within a single denomination when its passive member suddenly becomes a conscious and committed propagator.

The fact that it is not possible to procedurally “awaken” – in a guaranteed way, in people who undergo rehabilitative influences – faith in God, hope for the future or the associated faith in the meaning of suffering experienced, the need to atone for wrongdoings; the fact that it is impossible to induce via religious social techniques a sense of necessity to love one’s neighbor (let alone equip someone with the necessary means for it), which motivations – when taken together – should be the effect of a strong Christian or Judaic faith, does not prove that it would be impossible to create such conditions that are conducive to, and make more probable the emergence of a religious experience. This is done by liturgy, reading of sacred texts, encounters with charismatic believers of a given religion

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conducted surveys on a group of 17,266 adults (11 questions related to religious beliefs, 8 to religious practices). The study was conducted in the years 1990–1991 in such diverse societies as: Western Germany, Eastern Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Poland, Norway, Slovenia, New Zealand and the United States. The authors obtained crime rates from the International Police (INTERPOL), while economic and demographic variables were taken from UN statistics.

or daily contact with followers of a particular belief system. The process of re-socialization should not be deprived of this, because the benefits of an environment organized in such way may prove notable despite the actually immeasurable phenomenon of faith. A religious experience, as James observes, is very specific because the content of faith does not have a real designation. Still, "a sense of reality may in fact adhere so strongly to the object of our faith that this object, by sensing its existence, completely polarizes our lives" (James 1958, p. 53).

Community and rituals as factors which transform identity

Elżbieta Hałas observes that one participates in a ritual because it moves, transforms the experience, and locates in a better place of the cultural space of quality, defined by religious ideology (Hałas 2007, p. 177). The truth about the transforming nature of the ritual is visible in one of the most important elements of Judaism and Christianity, which is the ritual of reconciliation (confession of guilt) and penance. The sacrament of Penance can transform the sense of guilt in the perpetrator of a crime and transform the perception of a criminal act as a transgression of the legal norm into a feeling of purification, peace of conscience or knowing that the evil will be disregarded by the supreme court of justice, that is, God. This allows the perpetrator to regain confidence in himself/herself and recognize the need to bear the consequences of his/her act as an important element in the process of penance for wrongdoings. A person who, thanks to the religious perspective, notices evil in him- or herself, recognizes his or her guilt and, at the same time, finds forgiveness for his or her sins in the ritual of reconciliation and repentance, gains a new perspective of accepting his or her *status quo*. As a person who, until now, has not known his/her 'alimony' obligations, who has blamed others for provoking violence, which he/she committed him-/herself, this person has a chance to recognize his/her own fault (sin) in the light of religious texts, and to accept the encountered consequences of his/her own acts (imprisonment, enforcement of claims, broken relationships, etc.).

In Christianity and Judaism, recognition of one's own moral misery is at the heart of conversion. Daniel Ange (Fesch 2005, p. 60), in a comment on Jacques Fesch's prison journals, cites an excerpt from a letter of one of the prisoners:

You ask me to tell you how I met God in prison. I'll tell you. It's simple. I harmed the society, I was tried and sentenced to death. They caught me and put me in prison to make me rot here. But the merciful God ignored the fact that „I harmed him”. I offended Him and violated His commandments. He came to my rescue and filled me with His infinite grace „I cry the tears of joy”, because I was lost. In prison, my great discovery was „The Face of Christ”. When I sometimes tell people that today I'm glad that I was sentenced to death, they don't understand. But I know why

I'm saying this. Those who claim that God is using our misfortune to redeem us are right. Especially me, „I have heard, seen and I live”. I am now one of His witnesses, because I met Him also in prison. „He called me, and I accepted Him”. I thank Him very much for allowing me to see my sins and mistakes. I am sure that He has forgiven me, even though they are countless.

Christianity and its rituals bring its members into a world of individual responsibility in which there is no room for blaming the system or the social structures for the evil that happens in the life of an individual. In Christianity, it is man and the profound change in his life (internal transformation, conversion) that is the starting point for changing the social system and structures. Man changes in the face of God. Benedict XVI notes that “if the heart of man is not good, then nothing else can become good. And the goodness of heart may ultimately come only from Him Who is Good – only Good” (Ratzinger 2008, p. 58). Such a change of heart may be individualized, but it may also result from the experience of a community (influence of others). Regardless of the context, conversion is always very personal. Irrespective of the reason for the beginning of the conversion (lived through in isolation, as in the case of St. Ignatius Loyola, who experienced a conversion while reading religious books during his period of military and boisterous life, similar to the conversion of St. Francis. In the meantime, the social and interactive context of conversion can be seen in St. Augustine, whose conversion was significantly influenced by St. Ambrose³) – it is the community of believers that sustains and perpetuates the effects initiated by conversion.

Small groups have the strongest socialization impact on people, therefore, personality is most strongly shaped by communities with a small population. Direct contact, mutual emotional and cognitive support, the presence of a system of social control in the form of admonition, ostracism and visibility, are conducive to shaping an individual's behavior according to a collectively defined pattern. In the Catholic Church itself, there are numerous religious movements in which there are many local communities that bring together small groups of members (20–30 people). Jolanta Mrozowska (2009, p. 31) depicts in a diagram the names of almost thirty communities which have been dynamically developing since the 1960s in France and throughout Europe, some of which – like the neocatechume-

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³ Other examples of conversions, more or less mediated by the influence of others, are described by Grzegorz Górny: “Just as the example of St. Vincent de Paul led Bl. Frédéric Ozanam, the writings of St. Teresa of Ávila led Edith Stein. One summer, she stayed alone in the house of her friend Hedwig Conrad-Martius. She was 30 years old at that time and a declared agnostic woman. In the evening, she accidentally reached for an autobiography of a 16th-century Spanish Carmelite and started to read. This book engrossed her so much that she could not break away from it. She did not finish until the next day. »When I closed the book, I said to myself: this is true«. On January 1, 1922, she was baptized under the name of Teresa, in memory of the mystic to whom she owed her conversion. Thirteen years later, she joined the same Carmelite Order as her spiritual master” (Górny 2012, p. P5).

nal communities – are already present in almost all countries of the world. Some of them are actively engaged in the evangelization of prisoners, among others, the international school of prayer Youth Light (fr. *Jeunesse-Lumière*) founded by Daniel Ange (prisons are not the only area of evangelization for the members of this community). We do not have too much information about the opening of new communities to the residents of penitentiary facilities. We know, however, quite a lot about the rehabilitative role of a prison chaplain (Pierzchała 2012).

Conclusion

When asking about effective forms (methods) for correction of patterns of thinking, feeling and reacting applied to deviant individuals, one cannot ignore the religious conversion, which some psychologists perceive as a richer source of definition of oneself and the world than an experience gained from psychotherapy (Hałas 2007, p. 47). This text provides a theoretical basis for its recommended studies on the phenomenon of religious conversion and its corrective potential.

When planning conduct of research on the role of faith and religion in the process of social reintegration of incarcerated individuals, two research procedures should be considered. The first is a quantitative survey on large research samples, where one should look for (statistically significant) relationships between declarations of imprisoned persons regarding their practices and religious beliefs, and the later level of their recidivism (the control group could consist of prisoners skeptical about metaphysical reality or of a general population of people who served a prison sentence in the past). The second procedure does not guarantee representativeness of the results, but it allows deep penetration of the identity change and the turning points in individual transgression of a secular worldview into a religious one, thanks to which the individual begins to believe in the possibility of changing his or her life. An in-depth interview would have to include people who experienced conversion in prison, which, in addition to declaring the occurrence of such a fact, would have to include a change in the sense of the *locus of control* (the people who have performed a Christian reinterpretation of their own past, the source of evil and guilt, should see in themselves – and not in other people or external circumstances – the sense of an internal location of action control). By conducting research in a cultural area different from the Christian one, one could explore how many people, who declare conversion, manifest an inner sense of the locus of control, and how many people have an external locus of control. Only the next step would be to analyze the meaning of conversion and its character for the later *desistance from crime* (Bernasiewicz, Noszczyk-Bernasiewicz 2015). The most valuable, in research terms, would of course be a methodological triangulation of quantitative and qualitative orientations i.e. conduct of surveys and in-depth interviews in the field of the presented issues.

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