

EX POST PAPER

The role of religion in exit programmes and religious counselling in prison and probation settings

Summary

On 10 and 11 October 2017, the RAN Working Groups on Prison and Probation, and Exit held a joint meeting in Madrid. The aim of the meeting was to exchange good practices and experiences on the role of religion in exit programmes as well as the role of religious counselling in prison and probation settings.

Practitioners and experts from several EU Member States attended. Participants either had experience of involving religion and religious counselling in exit programmes, prison, and probation, or of dealing with religion from a management or academic point of view. Working with or at least being aware of religion in exit programmes and in prison and probation has potential benefits; nevertheless, the work is not free from obstacles and challenges.

This paper will focus on:

1. Target groups;
2. Existing good practices in Member States;
3. Reintegration into society.

It aims to provide guidelines for those practitioners who are working with or considering involving religion in these settings, as well as obstacles and difficulties this might entail.

Introduction

Working with religion in exit programmes is a sensitive topic. Some of the sensitivities are related to questions over the extent to which the separation between church and state allows religious input into state-run or financed projects. Others sensitivities relate to questions about interfering in someone's religious convictions, or how these should be valued. Finally, religion is sometimes simply not acknowledged as cause for and/or answer to radicalisation.

Prisons have a long tradition of religious facilities and available clergymen, which are a natural outcome of freedom of religion. In an era in which religiously inspired extremism has grown, the extent to which clergymen can and should play a role in preventing, signalling or countering radicalisation in prisons can also be questioned.

It is important to address these two different settings separately. The ways in which religion can be incorporated into exit programmes cannot necessarily be replicated for religious counselling in prison and probation — and vice versa.

Some of those participating in exit programmes, in prison and on probation are interested in religion. They might be looking for rules to abide to ensure their spiritual wellbeing, or want to discuss religion from their own radicalised point of view. When religion is an important issue in life, experience and research show that this can be a good starting point for discussion. Therefore, it is important to have practitioners that are open to this and can actually talk about religion-related issues.

How is religion included (or not) in exit programmes/counselling in prison and probation?

Within the European Union, religion is used in exit programmes to varying extents. Some involve religion systematically, as part of efforts to debunk/deconstruct the religiously inspired extremist ideology and/or guidelines for a new life. Other programmes adapt to the needs of the clients and will work on religion upon request. Religion can also be a way to open the conversation, especially when it is a central part of someone's. In such cases, there is a tactical motivation. Finally, some programmes do not work with religion at all and focus instead on behavioural factors or frustrations, for example.

The religious counselling offered in prisons and to probation clients also varies widely. Clergymen can be paid staff members, work pro bono, be appointed by a religious community or the prison service and so on. Depending on the form, the clergyman's autonomy differs. As mentioned above, religion is an individual need that could potentially extend to the whole prison population. In guiding religious prisoners and helping people to (re)convert to Islam, clergymen can offer a degree of protection by presenting an alternative to the extremist versions – and they may also notify others of worrying signs. Religious counselling can be considered a positive way of supporting vulnerable

people, who are also targeted by recruiters with a negative violent *us-them* narrative. Taking care of religious wellbeing remains, however, the primary task of clergymen.

In the Spanish prison system, interventions targeting those linked to violent radicalism do not focus on religion. The thinking behind the approach is that radicalisation is linked to individual trajectories: frustration and resentment against society are the main psychological traits. Within this picture, the religious dimension offers a framework for personal re-structuring: guidance and a clear set of norms. What should be changed in case of radicalisation is the fact that religion is abused as a framework justifying crimes and violent actions. This is especially true when knowledge of Islam is limited. and Myths on religion provided by extremist groups have high impact on the state of mind and fanaticism.

The target group(s)

Bearing in mind the differences described above in relation to the use of religion, identifying the target group for an exit programme, or religious counselling in prison and probation is paramount.

In the latter context, the target group encompasses potentially the whole prison population. Indeed, everyone has the right to profess his/her religious beliefs. However, in practice, the target group is narrowed down to those who have an interest in religion and/or are religious. Therefore the approach depends strictly on the needs of the prisoners. In exit programmes, the target group specifically includes radicalised persons, some of whom are considered to have been religiously inspired.

The starting point in the use of religion must be differentiated and adapted to the circumstances – and the target group. And practitioners working with prisoners and those following exit programmes should also meet specific requirements; they should not only be trained and experienced, but also able to acknowledge how religion should be approached differently in accordance with the context.

As suggested above, there are some overlaps. While religiously inspired ideology can be an easy solution for those feeling vulnerable – for both prisoners and individuals in exit programmes – dynamics within society and prisons can further fuel this feeling.

Biased views can also lead unexperienced prison staff to regard any sign of religiosity (religious terminology and practice, for example) as signs of radicalisation, thus feeding the feeling of vulnerability and unfairness. Polarisation and this lack of knowledge can therefore worsen the feeling of vulnerability, which feeds the appetite for extremist ideologies. Trained chaplains and exit workers are well positioned to identify the signs of radical and extremist thinking within a religious discourse. Normal religious assistance can also help indirectly. Indeed, the primary job of chaplains is spiritual assistance: this can take the form of open group assistance, such as the Friday prayers. This form targets a much wider target group, as everybody can join in, while exit programmes are implemented in closed settings.

Open settings are particularly useful when targeting another prisoners sub-group: those who are not religious as such but are attached to religion for cultural reasons (e.g. festivities, values and sense of belonging). An open group setting makes it possible to reach out to these individuals, thus offering an answer to their religious and cultural needs but at the same time making them resilient against recruiters and radical views.

Voluntary participation is a condition *sine qua non* for exit work to succeed. Success can be defined as the programme:

- minimising the risk of re-offending and maximising the chances of (re)integration into society;
- preventing recruitment, both active and passive;
- preventing the individual from committing extremism-related offences.

In addition to willing, the definition and full understanding of both short-term and long-term goals also increase the chances of success. It should be noted however that a religious person is more likely to reach out to a clergyman whereas a radicalised individual instead tends to challenge and be suspicious of a religious counsellor as he/she has his/her own sources of (radical) religious inspiration.

Exit practices around Europe

Overview of common elements

<i>Without religion</i>	<i>With religion</i>
No single solution fits all. Programmes should not be too detailed, but flexible enough to adapt to individual circumstances. Each future step is decided at the current step.	
Religious services are offered if needed, but do not replace the role of specialists: Imams and specialists on extremist religion are compatible and complementary.	Religion is considered fundamental by practitioners to empower radicalised individuals as they seek to (re)build self-esteem.
The aim is to raise awareness and, without changing beliefs, teach individuals to live in a pro-social way: e.g. working on emotional awareness to reduce grievances, improving empathy, opening minds towards other cultures. Religion supports all of this.	In terms of purely theological supply, the Friday prayers are a very accessible opportunity to get acquainted with religion and can be an opportunity to offer further religious guidance, especially when recruiters on the other side are trying to sell Daesh as a positive alternative, and inmates or converts know little or nothing about Islamic literature. After the liturgy, for example, they can ask questions on literature and theology. This is not to be considered as exit work, however can strengthen resilience.
Without willing, there is no margin for intervention.	
Research shows that trying to reverse religious ideologies is not the most effective method in exit work. Religion can be used, but interventions should address critical thinking: how to critically re-evaluate one's own ideas.	Exit workers need to have religious knowledge because they need to gain the trust of the religiously inspired radical person both as professional as as a teacher.
Some practitioners have found that work on positive emotions has proven successful: emotions used as strategic therapy. This works because emotional strategies help to increase positive emotions that help to create the opening needed for a meeting with a counsellor (which is the very first step) and start a dialogue and debate (which are the following steps). This works especially with those youngsters that have therapy because their parents insist – emotional strategy can help the therapist to create the link needed to proceed with the intervention.	Emotional strategy can also facilitate religious counselling. Many inmates sentenced for petty crimes find a certain calm when they regain self-esteem after abandoning the inner hatred they had previously nurtured.

An existing good practice (Turin, Italy).

In Turin prison Lorusso Cutugno (Italy) spiritual assistance has been offered to Muslim offenders since November 2016. To counter the risk of having self-appointed Imams in prison, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2015 at national level between the Penitentiary Administration and UCOII, an Italian umbrella organisation representing smaller Islamic faith organisations. This association identified the Imams that would qualify to work in prisons: after seven months of security and administrative checks, the first three Imams received accreditation and started their work with Islamist offenders. The project includes a counselling service for the family of the offenders.

Participation in the project is on a voluntary basis: counselling focuses on the values of Islam and reconciliation and uses arguments found in the Qur'an's. The Imams also volunteer and are not employed by the prison, nor by UCOII.

Staff training, language barriers and the lack of a dedicated place for worship remain areas where improvement is desirable.

Conclusions

What is still missing that could help reintegration?

Returning offenders to society is a challenge: re-offending, emotional crises and restrictive probation licences are only some of the issues that make this challenging. There are several stories of individuals who have not had real opportunities following their release from detention. This sometimes happens because the individual was in prison for a long time, or because of stigmatisation that leads to further isolation. During the reintegration period, the individuals concerned can also have the feeling of being watched by society. In relation to stigmatisation, research appears to indicate that communities into which the offender should reintegrate tend to regard non-religiously inspired interventions more positively.

The focus should be on young people, who can be easily influenced and are therefore the ones for whom change is an option. It is also important to remember that their anger will remain with them for the rest of their lives if it is not dealt with through dialogue and counselling.

There is room for improvement to current practices dealing with the transition from prison to society. Gaps and recommendations are identified in table 2.

Gaps and recommendations for successful reintegration.

<i>Gaps</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>
Rigidity of interventions	It is advisable to think out of the box: which intervention can best be adapted to individual circumstances? There are several different models of interventions involving religion (gender specific, faith-inclusive, among others). There are also organisations that do not identify themselves as religious, but run programmes that stimulate critical thinking.
Trust deficit and engagement	The inclusion of formers, who had previously taken a similar, religiously inspired extremist path, could help show how to build trust. In addition, they could help to involve the offender in pro-social and democratic groups (engagement).
Mosque and family support and coordination	Coordination between exit/prison officers on one side, and the mosque and family on the other side, is an effective practice. When a person is returning from prison, how the mosque can support the offender and his/her family should be planned well in advance and in a coordinated manner.
Religion	Religion can help reintegration, just as it can be used in counselling and exit interventions in prison and probation. A religious mentor not only facilitates a person to find a house and a task to pursue in the society, but through spiritual assistance can also provide hope and social objectives as described in religious teachings. Such a mentor can also and teach individuals how to reconcile religion and society. While work may begin while the person is still in prison, the job is far from finished when the person is released; the intervention is even more important once the person is experiencing the challenges of returning to society first-hand.
Mentor-mentee combination	Religion should be taken into account when assigning a mentor to a mentee. There is no rule, and whether they should have the same religion is debatable. As for a male-female combination, this decision should be taken on an ad-hoc basis.
Opposition and bias by staff	Staff working in prison, probation and community settings must be trained: as knowledge of Islam increases, prejudices fade.

ANNEX I – The Spanish programme on violent radicalisation

The Spanish prison system does not focus on religion in its programme on violent radicalism. But this does not mean that religion is avoided; on the contrary, there is full acceptance within the programme of individual religious needs. In addition, religion and psychosocial intervention are regarded as compatible. The programme is intended to provide clear guidance, without being too rigid: it allows for flexibility and adjustment on individual cases.

Two main characteristics of the programme are:

1. A willingness to participate, which is a legal requirement;
2. The option of using group-settings alongside individual counselling.

The programme aims to i) prevent recruitment of vulnerable prisoners; ii) minimise re-offending and maximise reintegration; iii) prevent individuals from committing extremist offences.

The programme has three target groups:

- a) Those sentenced for terror-related acts ('hard-core' extremism, separated from the rest of the prison population).
- b) The recruiters: charismatic and intelligent persons, disseminating extremist ideas among other prisoners. They tend to have a criminal past.
- c) Vulnerable prisoners: second and third generation Spanish youths, converts without Islamic backgrounds and other generally vulnerable people that could easily be influenced by extremist ideas.

Given the categorisation above, the inclusion of religion in the programme largely depends on the individual (religious) needs of the inmate. However, to ensure a comprehensive picture, the programme also pays attention to those who stay away from extremism.

The programme is based on principles, both common and tailored to the target group. Common principles:

- cooperation between staff focused on security and treatment is essential;
- rehabilitation of the person must be a holistic, group effort, with all elements of the programme integrated effectively and complementing one another;
- spiritual support is allowed during imprisonment;
- learning Spanish is facilitated; education programmes are offered to encourage educational attainments and improve the cultural integration of prisoners.

For targeted groups, an individualised intervention that builds a relationship of trust with the prisoner is required. The individual's search for identity is a key component within interventions for this target group, as well as the categorical rejection of any cooperation with criminal network. For

recruiters and vulnerable prisoners, , interventions can also be organised in small groups, on the basis of a cognitive and behavioural approaches tailored to leaders and followers.

The content of the programme is similar to the three target groups. Sessions are organised as follows:

Session	Content
Raising Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Building a solid and trusting professional-inmate relationship. ▪ Analysis of inmates’ lives and unmet needs through a natural exchange of information. ▪ Emotional awareness, helping to reduce feelings of grief, frustration and even anger. ▪ Understanding cognitive distortions and the link between behaviour, emotions and mindset. ▪ Personal identity and awareness of commitments until the present day. Participants also develop insights into their membership of particular groups. ▪ Becoming aware of personal needs and beliefs, focusing on those values considered by the individuals as sacred and unchangeable.
Personal Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understanding cognitive distortions and the link between behaviour, emotions and mindset. ▪ Personal identity and awareness of commitments until the present day. Participants also develop insights into their membership of particular groups. ▪ Becoming aware of personal needs and beliefs, focusing on those values considered sacred and unchangeable. ▪ Awareness of violent behaviour and discussion of why participants have supported harm against other people or groups. ▪ Training in social values, respecting human rights and the Spanish Rule of Law. Learning to manage inter-personal conflicts. ▪ Helping inmates to consider how they can live their lives in a way that fits their needs in a pro-social way, away from violence and extremism.
Special (recruiters and vulnerable prisoners)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Awareness of violent behaviour and discussion of why participants have supported harm against other people or groups. ▪ Training in pro-social values, respecting human rights and the Spanish Rule of Law. Learning to manage inter-personal conflicts. ▪ Helping inmates to consider how they can live their lives in a way that fits their needs in a pro-social way away from violence and extremism.

In terms of assessment, the Spanish system foresees a three-phase step. Currently, it is working on a 'specific assessment' that would be deployed before the implementation of the programme (not a risk assessment tool). Furthermore, a psychological test to assess the state of mind or any tendency towards violence (HCR-20, for instance) can also be carried out. And finally, during the implementation of the programme, there must be a permanent exchange of information between all professionals involved (a report should be prepared and sent out from each prison at least every two months).

The programme in place has also defined achievement indicators, which are:

- assistance, level of performance and efforts during the intervention;
- a gradual distancing from violent behavior;
- a progressive (not sudden) review of extreme beliefs;
- a change in commitments;
- improvement in empathy and pro-social skills;
- understanding of the root causes of violent extremism;
- acceptance that past activities were criminal;
- consistency between verbal manifestations (what they say) and daily behaviour.