

28/04/2021

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN WG PRISONS Meeting

6-7 October 2020, online

Religious counselling, training and interfaith dialogue in prison

Key outcomes

Religion and religious counselling can play a major role in offender rehabilitation and reintegration. The opportunity to practice one's religion in prison and to have access to a representative of this religion is a human right allowed in prison. The RAN PRISONS working group meeting on 6–7 October 2020 considered religious practice in prison, interfaith dialogue, the roles of imams and other religious leaders, and how prison staff can be trained to understand religion and extremism. This paper presents the input of participants and experienced practitioners at the meeting and underlines the following three points.

- 1) For imams, chaplains and other religious counsellors, **preserving confidentiality** is key for one-to-one religious counselling. If confidentiality is not preserved, religious counselling risks coming to a halt.
- 2) Religious counsellors form trustful relationships with inmates and should therefore **not form part of risk assessment or multi-agency discussions** (this is directly related to point 1). During such processes, religious counsellors might be expected to share more information than they would like to, and inmates might become sceptical and distrustful of them.
- 3) **Interfaith dialogue** and other interfaith encounters can build a bridge to the outside world and prepare inmates for release: they can foster an inclusive space that is open to dialogue, critical thinking and exchange. Interfaith exchanges can help to prevent extremist, polarised, 'us vs. them' mentality, and they can help foster a safer prison environment.

This paper summarises the main outcomes of the working group meeting: (1) the highlights of the discussion, (2) recommendations, and (3) inspiring practices and proposes possible follow-up actions.

Highlights

RAN survey circulated via the European Organisation of Prison and Correctional Services (EuroPris) network

Ahead of the RAN PRISONS working group meeting, RAN created a survey that was circulated by EuroPris to their network. The survey results, used to kick off the meeting, offered valuable insights into religious practices in prisons throughout Europe.

Many of the questions asked received unanimous answers, as shown below.

- All respondents represent jurisdictions that **provide religious assistance/counselling** for religions recognised by law or registered with national authorities.
- All respondents claim they aim to support inmates and their families, seek to enhance exchange and dialogue and hope to contribute **to prisoner rehabilitation by providing spiritual guidance**.
- Most respondents said they provide a **space for religious worship** within prison. This could take the form of a multifunctional room, but could also be a cell, depending on circumstances.

Some questions received mixed answers, as shown below.

- **Funding of religious counsellors.** Counsellors may be funded by the state, the prison administration or religious communities. Some work on a voluntary basis.
- **The role of religious counsellors in deradicalisation programmes.** The part played by religious practitioners in prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) programmes (e.g., sharing of information, contributing to risk assessment) is unclear, and can be problematic for all parties involved. Many religious practitioners consider themselves spiritual guides, not P/CVE practitioners. As such, conflating these roles could compromise fundamental principles of their profession, such as confidentiality.
- Training of **prison staff**. Some prisons offer no training at all on religion and extremism, while others may provide basic or even intensive training. There are differences in the level of awareness and capacity to identify signs of radicalisation and distinguish these from regular religious practice.

Religious counselling in prison

Religious counselling in prison is crucial to the well-being and personal development of inmates. These religious services can be a force for positive change for inmates, providing them with spiritual guidance to support them in challenging circumstances and guide their growth as individuals.

- Religious counsellors in prison understand their role in terms of **supporting inmates**, not treating inmates. They develop personal relationships (based on trust) with the inmates.
- **Confidentiality is crucial** for their role in the prison context, and maintaining confidentiality is a basic principle of their profession. Religious counsellors in prison are convinced that breaching confidentiality is not an option. "If we are not adamant about being confidential, it will be the end of chaplaincy."¹ However, if inmates display signs and behaviour posing a concrete and imminent danger to safety within the prison or for general society, this needs to be reported.
- **Prisoners have the right to receive religious counselling.** This must be understood as a right that prisoners are entitled to and can claim, not an opportunity that is granted to them.
- **Standards and arrangements for prison work differ across countries.** In Italy, for instance, prison imams work on a voluntary basis, while in other countries are part of the salaried prison staff. Moreover, in most countries represented in the meeting, religious counsellors must speak the official language of the country. Another point of difference is the provision of special training programmes or degrees for becoming a religious counsellor: although such training exists in some countries, it is a challenge in others. Some participants stressed the need of having highly educated counsellors and chaplains, who can provide convincing (and even complex when needed) answers, and not just simple and basic answers.

¹ Quote from one of the meeting participants.

One of the worst scenarios is having in a prison self-appointed imam who provide religious guidance to inmates.

- Experiences from Germany suggest that knowledge of religion among inmates in several cases is extremely low, although they are happy to participate in group religious activities. Counsellors can play an important role even in proposing relevant readings to the inmates.

Training of prison staff

Prison staff training on religion and religiously inspired extremism was identified as key for maintaining a healthy prison environment. Lack of awareness and understanding in this area can result in stigmatisation and ultimately contribute to further radicalisation.

- Prison staff have **differing levels of preparedness and awareness** for dealing with religion, religious prisoners and religious caregivers. These staff can play an important role in inmates' personal development as well as in their risk assessment because they interact with the prisoners daily. This involvement requires training prison staff on **how to detect signs of radicalisation**.
- Mistrust and lack of collaboration between prison staff and religious counsellors can hinder the process of rehabilitation and reintegration. Clarity concerning the separate roles and how to cooperate and communicate can help reduce this stress.
- In Italy, prison staff training has contributed to **more effective interventions and increased awareness** regarding this topic. It has even been linked to a drop in numbers of (perceived) radicalised inmates. Increasing awareness of prison staff has shown to have an important positive impact on the reduction of "false positives".

Interfaith dialogue and projects

- Interfaith dialogue can teach soft skills that are crucial for peaceful co-existence with others in a diverse democratic society. **Openness as well as acceptance** of other religions can be a first step towards accepting alternative opinions and viewpoints, by highlighting commonalities rather than differences. Extremist perspectives are usually based on a polarising, "black-and-white", "us vs. them" mentality. However, interfaith dialogue can expand boundaries, broaden this outlook and encourage critical thinking. It creates a space for dialogue and exchange where prejudices and discrimination are diminished. This can be crucial in the deradicalisation process as well as in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.
- During detention, interfaith dialogue can function as **a bridge, linking inmates to the outside world and society**. This is because different individuals from diverse religions visit prisons to discuss topics that are also relevant to general society. Prisoners might feel more included in society through interfaith dialogues than through one-to-one religious counselling (which has other goals, such as providing personal support to an inmate).
- Interreligious forums at local and national level can **organise interfaith activities both within and outside prison settings**. This could encourage dialogue and reduce polarisation in society.
- **Support rehabilitation after release**. Soft skills and the points mentioned above can contribute to a more stable rehabilitation and reintegration process.

Recommendations

- The role of chaplains and other religious counsellors in deradicalisation work.** It is clear these actors can play a decisive role in P/CVE by encouraging dialogue and critical thinking about religious as well as personal matters. This raises the question as to whether they should form part of official deradicalisation programmes. Meeting participants stressed that prison chaplains and other religious counsellors seek to help inmates and build a personal relationship with them, **not to assess inmates**. Therefore, they should not be included in deradicalisation programmes, as this would potentially require involvement in risk assessment which could undermine the counsellor-inmate personal relationship. Deradicalisation activities and religious care should be kept separate, but always keeping in mind that safety must be a common goal for all.
- Multi-agency and multidisciplinary cooperation.** Cooperation and exchange between prison staff, prison leadership and religious counselling is crucial. In some cases, religious counsellors who are not part of the regular prison staff may encounter scepticism as external actors, especially if there is uncertainty about their assignment or role in the prison setting. It's important for prison authorities to establish clear regulations and guidelines for religious caregivers regarding their role and scope (including any limitations/boundaries in place for security and safety purposes). Multi-agency cooperation with all actors is crucial before, during and after the sentence and should be focused on security and rehabilitation.
- Religious counselling is a basic right for inmates.** While Christian chaplaincy is an established right for inmates, often implemented through chaplains who work in a prison regularly or even from their own offices in the prison, other religions have only begun to be represented in this context in the past decade. It is important that inmates and counsellors recognise that religious counselling is a basic right – for all religions. Every inmate has the right to request a place of worship and to meet with a religious counsellor.
- Selection, quality standards, education, training and remuneration of prison chaplains and other religious counsellors.** Religious counsellors should be carefully selected and vetted to ensure their work is based on a tolerant religious interpretation. Operating in a prison context as a religious counsellor could be linked to a training or even a degree-level education programme. One of the most important aspects is that the religious counsellors must be fluent in the country's official language. How the accreditation is awarded in the different Member States is an issue that should be further explored.
- Prison staff training.** Frontline practitioners should receive basic training on identifying the behaviour, process and dynamics that can indicate signs of radicalisation and/or vulnerability. Prison staff should be trained in cultural and religious awareness, so they are equipped to interact properly with prisoners from diverse multicultural and religious backgrounds. Prison staff training must be customised for each country, considering the specificity of the prison population of each country. It's important to separate the training of imams from the training of prison staff.

Relevant practices

- Training of prison staff: Austrian NGO **Derad** delivers basic training for prison staff as well as intensive classes for those already familiar with the topic. The curriculum covers the history of terrorism and violent extremism, processes of (de)radicalisation, push and pull factors, and the difference between religion and ideology.
- The University of Bern, Switzerland, offers a [postgraduate study programme in prison chaplaincy and religious counselling](#).

3. COREIS Italiana is one of the main national organisations representing Islam in Italy in national and local institutions. In addition to this institutional representation, COREIS is also particularly active in education and training on Islam and interfaith and intrareligious dialogue. One of COREIS's social projects involves promoting SIMURGH, a unique interfaith programme aimed at prison workers and inmates in the Lombardy region of north Italy and coordinated by the penitentiary administration. COREIS imam training courses and Islamic studies programme concentrate on academic and direct knowledge of the Italian juridical, social, cultural and linguistic landscape and its roots.

Further reading

Peter Admirand explores the hopes and limitations of interfaith dialogue and its contribution to the prevention of violence in the article "[Dialogue in the Face of a Gun? Interfaith Dialogue and Limiting Mass Atrocities](#)" in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.

The Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies report [The Role and Contribution of a Multi-Faith Prison Chaplaincy to the Contemporary Prison Service](#) criticises the lack of diversity in the representation of chaplains and the lack of direct representation of prison chaplains per se.

Readers looking for more insights and the opportunity to connect with prison chaplain colleagues worldwide can visit the website of the [International Prison Chaplains Association](#).

Religion and Prison: An Overview of Contemporary Europe, Martínez-Ariño, Julia, Zwilling, Anne-Laure (Eds.), 2020.