



## Meaning, Purpose, and Hope

### Reflections on Religion, Spirituality, and Life of Leaders Behind Bars

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#### Abstract

Meaning, purpose, and hope in the context of religion and spirituality in the lives of individuals sentenced to a state penitentiary who demonstrate leadership qualities was investigated. Utilizing in-depth interviewing of 23 subjects, an experienced doctoral level sociologist and participant observer explored questions about attitudes and practices related to religion and spirituality. Results confirmed that nearly all of the subjects drew strength from spirituality, while utilizing differing strategies to cultivate meaning, hope, and purpose.

Keywords: religion, spirituality, leadership, prison, meaning, purpose, hope

#### Introduction

Over fifty years ago, the Viennese psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, challenged modern persons to wrestle with the importance of the question of the meaning in their lives. That is to answer such questions as “Why does one exist?” or “Is there a purpose to one’s life?” Frankl, drawing upon his experience as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, argued that answering such questions about the meaning of one’s life was not only important, but rather, it was essential. He had found that those concentration camp prisoners who had no meaning in their lives – or, if they had lost it – readily succumbed to despair and often gave up their struggle to survive.

Meanwhile, those in the most dire circumstances who maintained purpose and meaning more often survived and thrived afterward. Frankl said that the “way a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails . . . gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life” (67). Further, he asserted, “Psychological observations of the prisoners have shown that only the men who allowed their inner hold on their moral and spiritual selves to subside eventually fell victim to the (prison) camp’s degenerating influences” (69).

It has been estimated that more than one quarter of the world’s prisoners today are incarcerated in America; often those in prison have received harsh sentences for nonviolent offenses (Arditti). Caldwell and Klinger note that “the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) estimates that 6.6 percent of all individuals born in the United States will spend some time in Prison” (79). With the advent of such harsh sentencing during recent decades, many have been given punishments that amount to the loss of most of their productive years. These years are then spent in what amounts to human warehouses, with little to do. Millions of lives so diminished prompts one to ask the question: how can a person avoid succumbing and find meaning living under such conditions? Though prisons are not so severe as concentration camps, they come with the additional burdens of stigma and blame that will last even after release, and inmates tend to lack the cohesiveness of other oppressed groups.

Questions of meaning in life are, of course, also often related to questions of spirituality. Thus, when one explores the presence or absence of meaning in a person’s life, one may also be examining questions related to that person’s spiritual compass. Additionally, meaning in life can be seen to be predicated upon a person’s having purpose and hope. While much research focuses on the dysfunction ubiquitous in U.S. prisons, this study specifically aimed at understanding the lives and perspectives of people doing well behind bars despite the environment.

In this study, the authors have investigated the question of meaning and spirituality in the lives of those who have been sentenced to terms to be spent in a state penitentiary and demonstrate positive leadership qualities there. Utilizing in-depth interviewing, an experienced doctoral-level sociologist, as an embedded participant observer, explored a variety of topics with leaders in prison ranging from meaning in life, attitudes and practices related to religion and spirituality, as well as advice that might be given to others about these topics. It is assumed that such advice would most probably be a clear window into a person’s own closely held beliefs and practices. The unique feature of this study is that the interviews were conducted by a professional researcher – a person who was also sentenced to be behind bars – who was a trusted “insider” to the participants, encouraging a candor and veracity that is, to say the least, rare.

## Literature Review

The topics of meaning, religion, and spirituality in prison have not been well investigated by many researchers. Dammer observed that “the topic has generally been largely untold in criminological research” (36). Clear and Sumter have noted that “we know little about religion in prison, particularly as it relates to the psychological adjustment of offenders to the prison environment and reduction in problematic behaviors such as disciplinary infractions” (127). The significance and poignancy of an incarcerated person wondering about the purpose in his

life is captured by the biography of Charles Colson, imprisoned after his involvement in the Watergate scandal, who said he asked himself this question: “Could there be a purpose to all that had happened to me?” (quoted in Sullivan: 74). That many persons in prison do not experience meaning can be fairly expected; actually, in a recent study of French prisoners by Manhouj et al., it was found that fully one-third of the prisoners reported that they “found no meaning in life” (830).

What is meant by the terms “religion” and “spirituality” as used in this study? Religion, generally has to do with “supernatural feelings or awe . . . (and) with ritual practices such as daily prayers or votive offerings like gifts or money given to a deity or deities” (Cook: xiii). The practice of a religion, with its collective relationships and defined belief systems, can help someone to feel anchored in the world, thereby giving meaning to his or her experience. On the other hand, Groen, Coholic, and Graham, citing the work of Canda and Furman, define spirituality as being “a universal quality of human beings and their cultures related to the quest for meaning, purpose, morality, transcendence, well-being, and profound relationships with ourselves, others and ultimate reality” (2).

Religion and spirituality can be a source of meaning and hope in a person’s life. Johnson, Thompkins, and Webb reported the results of their systematic review of research studies related to the “role religion may or not play in instilling hope and meaning, or a sense of purpose in life for adherents” (14). They found that, in 25 of the 30 studies which they examined, that “increases in religious involvement or commitment are associated with having hope or a sense of purpose or meaning in life” and a greater sense of optimism (14). These studies related to persons in the general population, but are suggestive of what one might expect to find in a correctional setting, too; in fact, there is evidence that this will be the case. Johnson reported that, in a study of English prisoners who had become religious, conducted by Shadd Maruna, these prisoners now had “a sense of meaning and purpose they have not known before” (2011: 122).

For the past twenty years, or so, there has been much discussion about the function of religion in the penal system. For example, following President George W. Bush’s initiatives, there was a growth of what were known as Faith Based prisons or prison units around the country in Alaska, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Ohio, Texas, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. O’Connor, Duncan and Quillard have observed that there appear to be several factors, in addition to the “faith-based initiatives” that had encouraged the growth of interest in religion in the prisons. These factors include: (a) the appeal of Native American, Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist practices to prisoners; (b) the Restorative Justice movement; and (c) the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), which has protected the rights of prisoners to practice religion.

Clear and Myhre, who studied the relationship between religion and prison, state that “there are four essential roles of religion in prison: explanatory, prescriptive, experiential and social” (20). In its explanatory function, religion helps an inmate “understand the mysteries of life” and, thus, also deal with the issue of death thereby providing meaning and comfort. Each of the major religious traditions has a set of ethical standards which are prescriptive and, when followed by an incarcerated individual, will tend to conflict with the “inmate code,” so he or she must learn to negotiate the resulting tense circumstances. These prescribed codes, though,

can also serve functionally to guide men in a typically free-for-all environment. The experiential aspect refers to the inmate's experience of religiosity in terms of a conversion or following religious practices. The social role of religion counteracts the isolation inherent in being imprisoned since the religious inmate has opportunities to meet with others at religious functions.

Clear and Myhre reported that the findings of their study of religiosity among the incarcerated suggested that prisoners find solace through the practice of religion as it can be a means of coping with the emotional strains inherent in prison life. There are three ways in which the prisoners find solace. First, religiosity can facilitate dealing with guilt over the wrongs one has done. Second, prisoners who become religious embark upon a new way of life that often leaves them feeling more empowered. Third, a benefit of religiousness for prisoners is that it helps them deal with loss, especially the loss of freedom. The authors also report that "religious programs can reduce the harshness of the prison environment; (i.e.) lack of safety, material comforts and heterosexual contact" (23).

Dammer investigated the reasons for inmates becoming involved in religious behavior. He found that the incarcerated have different reasons for being religious that depend on their intentions; their intentions can be understood as lying along a continuum ranging from sincerity to insincerity. Those who were seen as being "sincere" tended to be genuine in their beliefs and religious practice; the "insincere" were involved in religion for manipulative reasons and their behavior was not consistent with the ethical standards of the various religions.

For those whose religiosity was deemed sincere, the most frequently given reasons were that they would gain motivation, direction, and meaning for their lives; additionally, through observance of religious precepts, they might have hope and change their behavior in accordance with religious precepts, coming to lead better lives. Another benefit of the sincere practice of religion could be peace of mind which facilitates psychological survival and acceptance of harsh circumstances. For those tending toward insincerity, the reasons for their religiosity were to secure protection for themselves, as well as opportunities to socialize with other prisoners and female volunteers. Religious practice among the insincere also enabled them to have access to free food, books, music, or assistance from the chaplain.

In a significant article which examined the value of religion in prison, Clear et al. reported the findings of a qualitative study of inmates in several national prisons exploring the meaning of religion to inmates, as well as the role of religion in "preventing devaluation and fostering survival." Drawing upon the typology of religious motivation developed by Gordon Allport, the researchers looked at prisoners' intrinsic motivations (i.e., religious beliefs function centrally in a person's sense of meaning) and at extrinsic motivations (i.e., utilitarian purposes in service of acquiring advantages such as social or material comforts). According to the authors, intrinsic motivations reported by inmates included coping with dissonance (e.g., the failures caused by their earlier choices and behaviors), dealing with guilt, finding a new way of life (e.g., that faith had changed them), dealing with loss and finding inner peace. Extrinsic motivations involved concerns about increasing one's safety, getting material comforts like snack foods, gaining access to outsiders, and finding better relationships to fellow inmates, as well as to family members. Interestingly, the authors found there were some prisoners who

might describe themselves as religious, but who also preferred to avoid formal religious programming in prison.

There is growing evidence that religious practice has beneficial effects for prisoners. O'Connor notes that the role of religion in prison includes fostering pro-social learning, increased social control and attachment, and that "religious conversion can awaken and/or become more intense when an inmate becomes immersed in the religious or spiritual milieu of a prison" (18). We may already assert that religious practice in prison "helps people to deal with guilt, find a new way of life, cope with the many losses (freedom, family, sexuality) that accompany incarceration, find a safe place . . . , gain access to outsiders" and also facilitates better relationships with other inmate (O'Connor, Duncan, and Quillard: 563).

Thus, there have been but a handful of studies examining the role of religion in the lives of people behind bars. A few seem to parallel Frankl's concepts, but none have directly applied them. Still what research has examined this topic suggests that there may be a variety of benefits related to meaning, purpose, and hope to be found in faith for these individuals. It is in the context of such assertions that the authors of the current study explored the experience of meaning and religiosity, as well as having purpose and hope, among inmates in a state prison.

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted via a series of in-depth and open-ended interviews of 23 subjects. In recruiting the subjects, the overall strategy involved snowball sampling beginning with existing embedded connections built during the interviewer's initial two years at the institution. Those initial participants, persons who demonstrated the characteristics of positive leaders, were approached personally and the goals of the study explained; it was also suggested to possible subjects that participants should have some sort of faith or spiritual element in their life while specifying that a range of beliefs was intended. From there, people who thus understood the goals of the project and interview experience were then asked to introduce the interviewer to others they believed fit the desired traits. Gradually, the project developed a minor reputation, particularly among spiritual communities (notably Kairos, a non-denominational Christian group inviting all faiths) and some social circles. That also led to some individuals ultimately approaching the interviewer to volunteer to be interviewed or to recommend others who should be approached.

### *Sampling*

Specifically, the subjects who were sought were "positive leaders" at the prison, people "doing well despite the environment," and individuals who "have their heads on straight." Cornelius describes such individuals as persons "who by their demeanor and actions have a positive, good influence on the inmates around them. They lead by example" (50).

Having been integrated for two years into the prison setting, the primary researcher knew the social landscape well. The aim of the subject recruitment was to select a diverse group of positive leaders within the prison community. Attention was paid to finding people engaged in prosocial activities, despite the circumstances, to better understand ways to "thrive" in this setting. Besides generally seeking racial/ethnic heterogeneity (to the degree available in this facility), no particular traits were sought and having a religion was not a prerequisite for

participation. No attempt was made to obtain a representative sample or interview a comparison group because this study was inductive and qualitative, not designed for theory testing or statistical analysis.

More methodically, the selection of subjects can be described as an effort to find participants with these traits:

- Pro-social attitudes and beliefs;
- Positive overall perspective – avoiding the environmentally typical tendency towards negativity – however, this character trait does not preclude standing up for rights;
- Perceived by peers not to be overly obsequious to correctional officials;
- Leadership: whether they act quietly or boldly, these individuals are seen as examples of “success” in prison by peers;
- Non-confrontational and avoiding violence, when possible;
- Some type of spiritual/religious belief system or philosophy, but restricted to traditional religions.

During this process, there were a few people included who had spontaneously asked to be interviewed after learning about the project. In totality, the interviews generated nearly 250 pages of single-spaced, hand-written notes in sentence format.

The range of ages for the participants in this study was 27-63, with 8 persons in their forties constituting the largest grouping; additionally, there were 4 individuals in their twenties, 5 subjects in their thirties, and 6 were over fifty years of age. Among the 23 persons who were interviewed, all but 3 individuals had been convicted of violent offenses. Life sentences were being served by 7 of the interviewees. While 11 subjects had received sentences which ranged up to 30 years, there were 5 subjects whose sentences were significantly in excess of that. Most (12) of the subjects indicated that they had never been in prison before; at the time of the interviews, the participants reported having already served anywhere from 2 to 40 years of their sentences, with a group average of 16.9 years completed.

This research used a qualitative grounded theory approach (Glasser and Strauss), whereby we began with just a basic concept for research interests and proceeded organically and inductively. Specifically, we began with an interest in examining how meaning, purpose, and religiosity/spirituality might be significant factors in the lives of leaders behind bars, and these, along with their practices, were our main topics of interest. As the early interviews unfolded, the conversations fluidly brought us to also examine hope, coping, and conversion experiences. We also began asking about the treatment of different faiths in prison, sincerity in faith, inner strength, and inner peace, as well as soliciting advice for hypothetical newcomers. As indicated by this approach, field notes and periodic reflection were used to determine the emerging topics to incorporate into the discussions. Thus, the protocol was a continually evolving semi-structured set of open-ended questions.

Table 1. Demographic and Sentence Traits of Participants

Case/ Initials	Race/ Ethn.	Social Class as Child	Age	Married	Rel. Up- Bring	No. of Child.	Violent Charge?	Previously Served Time in prison?	Years Srvd. Now	Total Sent. in Years	Religion Now
1. AM	Mixed	LM <sup>1</sup>	25	No /D <sup>2</sup>	No	3	Yes	No	6	10	Sunni
2. DK	AA <sup>3</sup>	M	37	No	Yes	0	Yes	No	20	33	Sunni
3. SG	W	UM	63	Yes/W	No	2	Yes	No	32	63	Christ.
4. OM	AA	M	45	No	Yes	7	Yes	No	13	28	Christ.
5. BR	W	LM	46	No	Yes	2	Yes	No	27	Life	Buddh.
6. DG	W	M	47	No	No	0	Yes	No	23	Life	Christ.
7. WC	AA	M	49	No	Yes	7	Yes	No	25.5	Life +30	MST <sup>4</sup>
8. HP	AA	M	50	No	Yes	2	Yes	No	25	110	Christ.
9. MH	AA	P	55	No	Yes	0	Yes	No	37	Life	Christ.
10. LM	AA	P	59	No	Yes	3	Yes	No	40	Life	Christ.
11. PM	AA	M	53	Yes/W	Yes	5	Yes	No	15	20	Christ.
12. AB	Mixed	P	40	Yes	Yes	3	Yes	No	20	39	Christ.
13. RM	AA	P	27	No	No	0	Yes	No	7	18	Christ.
14. KY	AA	P	39	No	Yes	1	Yes	Yes/ (12 yrs)	5.5	18	None
15. RW	Mixed	M	33	No	Yes	2	No	No	8	15	Christ.
16. EH	AA	UM	45	Yes	Yes	6	Yes	Yes/ (5 yrs.)	3	5	Christ.
17. HB	Mixed	M	51	Yes	Yes	1	Yes	No	24	Life	Christ.
18. CG	AA	LM	46	No	No	1	Yes	Yes/ (13 yrs.)	10	13	NGE
19. BP	AA	M	37	No	Yes	0	No	Yes/ (3 yrs.)	2	2.5	Christ.
20. HH	Mixed	M	34	No	No	2	Yes	No	10	15	Sunni
21. SM	W	P	27	No	Yes	2	No	Yes/ (3 yrs.)	3	11.5	None/ Christ.
22. HS	AA	LM	43	Yes	Yes	6	Yes	No	13	27	None
23. WB	AA	P	47	No	Yes	1	Yes	Yes/ (2 yrs.)	23	Life +80	NGE

<sup>1</sup> U = Upper Class; UM = Upper Middle Class; M = Middle Class; LM = Lower Middle Class; P = Poor

<sup>2</sup> D = Divorced; W = Widower

<sup>3</sup> AA = African American; W = White;

<sup>4</sup> MST = Moorish Science Temple; NGE = Nation of Gods and Earths

Table 2. Summary of Participants' Characteristics

Age Range	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
Number of Subjects:	3 (13%)	5 (22%)	9 (39%)	5 (22%)	1 (4%)
Median Age = 45					
Race/Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	African American	Hispanic American	Mixed	
Number of subjects:	4 (17%)	14 (61%)	0	5 (22%)	
Social Class	Lower/Poor	Low/Middle	Middle	Upper/Middle	Upper Growing Up
Number of Subjects:	7 (30%)	5 (22%)	10 (44%)	1 (4%)	0
Sentence in Years	0-9.9	10-19.9	20-29.9	30+	Life
Number of Subjects:	2	7	3	4	7
Convicted for Violent Crime		Yes	No		
Number of Subjects:		20	3		
Previously Imprisoned		Yes	No		
Number of Subjects:		6	17		
Religious Upbringing		Yes	No		
Number of Subjects:		17	6		
Married		Yes	No		
Number of Subjects:		5	18		

### Interview Protocol

The tone of the interviews was entirely professional, and the project background and informed consent forms were thoroughly explained at the onset. However, the conversation thereafter was deliberately informal and fluid in its language to maintain comfort and accommodate local cultural norms. In this setting (i.e., a correctional facility), eliciting deep honesty requires maintaining the lexicon of the setting to varying degrees. As a trusted member of the population, our interviewer incorporated extensive experience utilizing qualitative interviewing skills with his knowledge of participants and understanding of local norms and vernacular.

Interviews all took place in the most private, quiet settings available within the prison, though total seclusion was disallowed and movement inconsistently restricted. Therefore, they spread out over nine months, from February to October, 2016. At first, they occurred in the “common area” within the pod at communal tables during early hours when few were out of their cells. Any time that others came within earshot, discussion was briefly paused to ensure privacy. No guards were *ever* present within earshot.

After the fourth interview, an arrangement was made to hold nearly all others in the most private setting possible, the chapel library, approximately once a week. Except for two of the later interviews where circumstances made it impossible, the rest (17 of 23) took place there, where guards were never directly present, and only the chapel librarian was around. He was in a different part of the room, out of direct earshot, and he made it a point to vacate entirely as

often as possible to extend the greatest comfort. Always asked, but no one ever expressed any privacy concerns or a sense of infringed confidentiality.

Interviews were informally scheduled for two hours. In some cases, guards, security procedures, and other forced movement necessitated that they occur over multiple sittings. A full explanation of the study, a chance to answer questions, and informed consent forms led off every interview. Therefore, a semi-structured script was followed, evolving according to Grounded Theory approach to include the initial and emergent themes and topics of interest. In every interview, though, a comfortable dialogue was deemed crucial and therefore some free-form divergence from the script occurred, often to seek additional clarity and information.

Coding and data analysis were a particular structural challenge because a lack of face-to-face, telephonic, or even e-mail contact between the interviewer and other researchers. To bridge the gap required extensive, lengthy mail correspondence. The interviews were transcribed by hand by the interviewer and distributed. At that point, the other researchers each separately read them and composed lists of the themes they observed within the existing topics of interest. Likewise, the researchers made separate lists of other emerging patterns they observed. After considerable dialogue to rectify those lists into a single master set of themes, each researcher re-read the transcripts, coding accordingly. Coding sheets were used reflecting the agreed upon key topics of interest. Results from these codings were then exchanged and discussed extensively.

The authors strove to ensure intercoder reliability at an acceptable level, though we recognize that this is a notable obstacle in this endeavor. Thus, our analyses focus not on statistical comparisons, but on clearly evident substantive patterns. Still, it is important to note that the vast majority of themes matched at rates over 80%. Many were over 85%, and a large chunk over 90%. Those that did not meet a benchmark of at least 75% were dropped from the findings. In cases that did not match, the discrepancies were often the result of the more detailed knowledge of the interviewer. This allowed him to pick up subtle references and “read between the lines” by recalling the actual interviews and knowing the participants.

## Results

Four topics of interest were discussed at length with all participants: meaning, religion/spirituality, purpose, and hope. Thus, the basic results of the study will be divided into four corresponding sections. First to be discussed will be those observations related to religious/spiritual beliefs of subjects. Then, we will examine results related to the experience and practice of finding meaning, purpose, and hope while incarcerated.

### *Meaning*

The main focus of this study was upon understanding how those who are leaders among the incarcerated find meaning in life. The answers of subjects about how they found meaning for their lives while imprisoned could be condensed into five general categories. These are: (1) parenthood and family; (2) teaching or helping others; (3) being an example to others; (4) righting past wrongs and being a better person; and (5) live according to faith/divine purpose.

*Parenthood and family:* Some five interviewees found their purpose in life by dedicating themselves to being good, or better, parents to their children, or working to maintain good

relationships with their family members such as their own parents, brother, or sisters. AM [1] said that “I have to be the best father to my children that I can be.” SM [21] explained that he found meaning by focusing on others important to his life: “People out there need me. My Kids. My family.”

*Teaching or helping others:* Eleven of the subjects reported that they found meaning in their lives by teaching or helping others around them; in fact, this was the most frequently given source of meaning. DK [2] said that he finds meaning by “getting out of my own way. To know that you help someone.” Another subject, SG [3], explained that he finds meaning when “I build up others. I show them the path not known before . . . watch one, do one, teach one . . . pay forward the effect.” RW [15] said: “Generally, during the day, I’m gonna have a couple of guys I talk to . . . I find that men share personal things with me. What I do is take things I’ve learned and share with them any advice that could help them better themselves.”

Helping or teaching others may be done with more intentional subtlety, too. DG [6] explained that he testifies to others about his beliefs: “I testify, too. It ain’t so much words. It’s in my actions, how I live, that I show Christ to other people in the hope that they will understand how I get this peace, hope, and joy that came from my faith.” WB [7] finds his meaning in this way: “I talk to guys. I’ll still sit here and listen to them. And I work. Work.”

*Being an example to others:* Five of the interviewees emphasized the importance of being an example to others as the source of meaning in their lives. HP [8] said: “I am able to help others and be an example of not a perfect way to live, but definitely a better way to live. It goes back to practicing what I read. Study. The old adage, ‘Practice what you preach’ . . . It’s about the actions.” MK [4] explained that “I try to be an example to those around me, that certain things are possible to achieve. We can do what we put our minds to . . . I can be successful. It’s all up to me.” BR [5] is very direct in his statement of how he finds meaning: “By giving of myself. Being an example.”

*Righting past wrongs and being a better person:* Among those who were interviewed for this study, five indicated that their source of meaning derived from their striving to become better persons or to right past wrongs that they’d committed. BR [5] reported that his source of meaning was in the knowledge that “I have a choice to control my life instead of it controlling me . . . Do we have a destiny? I choose to change from criminal or criminal-minded into especially humanitarian.” Reflecting on his being alive, RW [15] said that he finds meaning because “I am still alive, so there’s still a purpose to my life . . . every day when I wake up, there’s always a need to be a better person. Not just for me, but for those who love me. This is the meaning for me being sentenced.

*Live According to Faith/Divine Purpose:* For six of our participants, meaning was associated with the general idea of living a life that matched their faith. SH [20] explained, “My meaning is to worship Allah . . . then it would be to adhere to the Qur’an and Sunnah . . . If you always remember Allah, you’ll know the meaning of your life. Going back to obeying Allah and His Messenger.” DG [6] expressed a Christian take on the same, saying “I’m here with a message of reconciliation. Reconcile man back to God through Jesus Christ . . . It’s in my actions, how I live, that I show Christ to other people.”

For three of these six, this lifestyle was described as fulfilling a divine purpose. As BT [19] said, simply, “Because I believe I was put on this earth for something, and I’m not a quitter.” A more ecumenical explanation was that “I live now to be the man God is calling me to be, to direct people toward Him, to become what God calls a light to the world, the salt of the earth” [RM 19].

Notably, all six of these individuals who found meaning by living according to a divine purpose reported having a strong faith in traditional Islamic or Christian systems, rather than other, non-traditional beliefs.

### Religion

All 23 participants expressed involvement in some faith group, sometimes more than one. About two-thirds (14 of 23) claimed Christianity, a strong majority. Sunnah Islam was referenced three times and the Nations of Gods and Earths (formerly the Five Percenters) was referenced twice. Moorish Science Temple, Buddhism, Messianic Judaism were noted once each. These included three folks who claimed a combination of multiple belief systems. This wide diversity might be even broader except, at this prison, some services are not offered in this section of the compound. Within the faiths described, there was also a wide range of interpretations and practices. For example, in discussing Islam, AM [1] said, “Islam is classified as a religion to appease society, but really it is a way of life. It encompasses your entire being.”

Much of what the interviewees had to say about religion or religious persons in the context of a prison was consistent with the findings of researchers such as Dammer, Clear, and others, which was described already in this paper. For example, nearly half of those interviewed mentioned that they believe that there is some kind of a divine plan for their lives; they also report a “new life” after adopting religious practice. There were two areas, however, where the interviews yielded significantly different and important information. These areas were (1) a negative sense of religion; and (2) the study of more than one religious system and acceptance of other religious belief systems.

*Negative sense of religion:* Many of the subjects (13/23) reported that they viewed religion as negative. Instead, they preferred to consider themselves as spiritual, especially if they identified themselves as Christian. For example, one subject, DK [2], said that religion “is routine,” while MN [9] noted that “people who practice religions is (sic) more of an act than spiritual-minded.” TB [12] commented that “structured religion – it takes away from our opportunity to be closer to God and for Him to draw closer to us.” EH [16], with a comment somewhat reminiscent of a 1960’s *Time Magazine* cover title, said that “religion is dead.”

On the other hand, the word spirituality had a much more positive meaning for subjects. Fifteen out of 23 participants claimed spirituality only, while three called themselves both, and only three said “religious” only. SG [3] explained that being spiritual means being “in touch with myself, in harmony with others around me in my environment, as a path of enlightenment.” Being spiritual also seems to imply an inward focus as noted by DG [6] who said that it means “looking within yourself, being spiritual that way.”

*Study of more than one religious system and acceptance of other religious belief systems:* A surprising number of subjects (9/23) indicated that they had studied more than one religious system during their lives. For some, this stemmed from exposure to disparate faiths earlier in their

lives. The majority of subjects had had some exposure or association with Christianity when they were young, though some had no religious upbringing. For Christians, there was some changing of denominations as they engaged in religious practice, with the Kairos Prison Ministry mentioned as a significant influence in a number of their lives. Some who later became followers of Islam had exposure to Christianity as youths.

Some of the interviewees had clearly been “searchers,” making efforts to learn about more than just one religious tradition. For example, AM [1] reported having studied such varying traditions as Wicca, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Judaism, but settled on Islam when he found that, for him, “it made the most sense.” A second interviewee, RW [15], a person who identifies himself as Christian, reported that, over the years during his searching, he has made an effort to learn about the beliefs and practices of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, the Nation of Islam, Moorish Science Temple, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Wicca.

For some of the subjects, there was a blending of concepts or practices drawn from more than one of the – sometimes very different – religious systems. One person, BR [5], now identifies himself as a “Christian Buddhist” after his study of Eastern traditions. Another fellow, SG [3], who identified himself as a “Full Gospel Christian,” explained that he had formerly studied Wicca and said that there were “some aspects of Wicca that I still use.” Thus, there is a remarkable level of interest in and knowledge of various religions among those who were interviewed.

#### *Purpose*

The researchers wondered whether the interviewees would perceive a difference between the words, “meaning” and “purpose,” as purpose can be inherent in meaning and vice-versa. However, because the word “meaning” can have a metaphysical nuance, while “purpose” can be used in a more practical sense, it was decided to ask subjects about both the meaning and purpose in their lives; for most of the subjects, there was indeed a difference in how they responded to the two questions. Thus, most saw the meaning in their lives as distinct from the purpose. Some of the interviewees did not see a difference. For others, their answers reflected shifting boundaries between the two.

The purposes described by the interviewees were generally very specific and pragmatic; though there was also some overlap with the above-listed sources of meaning. There were five general categories for purpose: (1) becoming a “better man”; (2) helping, encouraging, or giving to others; (3) serving God and proselytizing others; (4) being an example or teaching others; and (5) preparing for tomorrow – get back out “on the street.” It should be noted that sometimes the same individual might mention a second, or even third, purpose for his life (from among the five categories just listed). Generally, only the primary or dominant themes are mentioned in the following descriptions because those appeared to reflect the most significant of the intended purposes mentioned by an individual.

*Becoming a “better man”*: For two of the interviewees, the purpose in their lives was to become a better man. AM [1] said he wants “to be a better man everyday.” For him, this would also include being an example and helping others. This subject described his method of becoming a “better man” by saying that “you have to look at yourself and understand your

faults and dispositions and essentially fix them. Control your carnal urges: greed, gluttony, lust . . . false speech. Embrace whatever situation and make the best of it.”

SM [21] identified a set of consecutive purposes. First, he said: “I feel I don’t have a purpose here except to grow to be a better person so I can go back out there and fulfill my purpose.” His method to facilitate his becoming a better person is “to work on trying to permanently change instead of temporary change. Less violence. More control over my emotions.”

In both cases, the interviewees, through their turning inwards, demonstrated a marked level of insight into the causes of their own problems and of the ways that they could change in order to reach their goals of becoming better persons.

*Helping, encouraging, and giving to others:* This was the most common purpose which subjects mentioned (14/23). Subjects expressed their intention to show an altruistic response to those around them, but their actual approaches to this goal could be quite varied. MK [4] focused on encouragement and said that “my purpose is to make my environment better any way I possibly can. Whether it’s letting a person know that ‘it’s not as you think’; learn something from this experience. Do your best to not make it happen again.” The reason that he takes this approach is because, as he says, “I don’t like to see people in pain . . . I feel everybody should have somebody in their life to encourage them. The same way I was encouraged.”

RW’s [15] benevolence focused on lifting spirits: “My purpose here is to inspire, encourage and to impact every individual’s life that I come in contact with . . . giving advice, they were down in their day and I made them smile.” His method is to “build rapport with them . . . Certain groups I always want to see smiling, so, at times, I’ll be the one to get the laugh out.”

Helping others remember their humanity is how KP [19] defines his purpose while imprisoned. He said that his goal is “to change some peoples’ lives.” By this, he means that he can “show them that coming to prison is not the thing. We’re not caged animals.” He accomplishes his goal by an effort to “try to be positive. Try to get them to think positive.” HS [22], on the other hand, whose goal is similar, said: “I don’t know how to put it into words. I believe there is a purpose . . . someone can look back at me and some of my actions and I believe some inmates can appreciate that (i.e., his benevolent actions). I don’t like nobody to disrespect nobody. Period. I got a thing about principle. Right is right. Wrong is wrong.”

Finally, some of the subjects emphasized the importance of giving of themselves in order to find purpose in their lives. CG [18] put it this way: “First . . . I understand the value of myself. I have to utilize what was given to bless someone else. I was put on earth to be the minister. Not in any religion, but in the value of life. It is to teach freedom, justice, equality . . .” For DG [6], generosity is important. He said: “There is a gift called giving. I think my gift is giving. I enjoy giving . . . ain’t just material things. It’s giving of self. Helping someone out. Helping them do things.”

*Serving God and proselytizing others:* Some of the interviewees have had profound religious conversion experiences. For a couple of these individuals, the purpose that they find in life is to emphasize their dedication to God and to share their religious beliefs with others. For example, when DK [2] was asked about the purpose of his life, he responded: “To serve God.

He commanded us to serve humanity.” MN [9] sees himself as being “a soldier of God” and says that his purpose is “to recruit those for the kingdom and help those who are less fortunate, who are down.”

In a similar manner, CG [18], who follows Nation of Gods and Earths, explained, “I have to utilize what was given to bless someone else. I was put on earth to be the minister. Not in any religion, but in the value of life. I was put on earth to be a servant.”

*Being an example or teaching others:* As mentioned earlier, there was some blending of the concepts of purpose and meaning for some of the interviewees. Thus, while some saw the meaning in their lives as consisting of their teaching, seven of the subjects specifically mention that their purpose is to either teach or be an example.

WB [7] believes that his own example can facilitate positive change in others because he says it works “by showing them how to live compared to how I used to live which was getting nowhere.” HP [8] answered: “My life mission is to be a proper example of what God wants me to be.” AB [12] was more specific: “I think an obligation to show young men you can be a father, a son, you can be a brother, and you can still maintain your faith without losing your integrity.” He also explained that he reminds himself of “who I am” and believes that there “is a massive identity crisis in prison.” Thus, in a sense, he is helping younger men to remember “who they are.”

*Preparing for tomorrow – getting back out “on the street”:* Three of the interviewees mentioned purposes that had to do with preparation for life after prison. BR [5] said that his purpose is “preparation for tomorrow because by doing correct behavior, correct thoughts, correct actions, right speech, right mind, it’s like a re-education process for myself.” KY [14] said: “My purpose is to get back to the street, get back to my baby. My only purpose is to get back to my family.”

### *Hope for Future*

Participants in the study were asked if they were hopeful about the future, and, if so, to explain why they were hopeful. All of the subjects indicated that they were indeed hopeful, some of them stating that they were very hopeful. There were four commonly given reasons for their hopefulness: (1) religious beliefs in a divine plan for one’s current life or that there will be an afterlife; (2) support being given by family, significant others, and friends; (3) psychological benefits to being hopeful; and, (4) plans or expectations for the future upon release from prison.

*Religious beliefs in a divine plan for one’s life or the existence of an afterlife:* This was the most common reason given for hope; eight of the interviewees offered some form of a religious justification for their being hopeful. That there is a divine plan for one’s life is reflected in this comment of AM [1] who said that he was hopeful “but, it is not up to me” and that he relied on “the mercy of Allah” because “everything is written,” and that he just does not “know what is going to happen.” EH [16] is hopeful because he believes he is fulfilling the divine purpose of his life. He says that “I have a confident expectation that as long as I listen to what’s been given to my heart, nothing can stop me.”

For some, their hope is based on a belief in a direct connection between their actions now and divinely granted benefits that they will receive in this life. LM [10] explained that he feels hopeful for this reason: “Because I believe if I continue to do God’s will, I am gonna get that blessing (i.e., parole).” RW [15] said that he is “very hopeful” because his faith “has promised me great success and abundant life as long as I keep Him (i.e., God) first.” He continued: “Things in my life have been turning around even while I am in prison.”

For others, there is no mention of specifically being rewarded for one’s actions by God, but there is nevertheless an expectation that God will provide. AB [12] asserted that he is hopeful because he feels that “nothing can stop me because I feel that God has prepared me for it. He states that “God always places things we need in our lives.” In his case, this gift from the divine is a support system, including friendship in prison.

*Current Support from family, significant others, and friends:* It was found that some persons reported that the hope which they feel derives from the support that they receive from their families. HB [17] answered that “I have been blessed with great family support, a beautiful woman in my life who has been supportive over the past 15 years.” In the experience of SM [21], support could make a big difference. He noted that earlier in his life, he had “lost everything – not meaning just the material sense . . . my wife, my kids, people . . . I had nobody,” and, thus, he had no support. But he said that he was “more hopeful” because “now there are more people there for me on my side” and “(t)hey help me make it through this.” HS [22] said that he is “very hopeful” and that “as long as I am living, I am going to prosper, one way or another” because “a lot of what I do is from family support. If I don’t have family support, I don’t know how long I’d be living.”

*Psychological benefits to being hopeful:* Some of those interviewed maintained a hopeful disposition because their lives were changing or because they perceived that there were psychological benefits from doing so. DK [2] is “very hopeful” and said that he is “developing a pro-social disposition.” He explained that “if you are used to a life of crime and then you are out of it, you start to understand the reality of responsibility and learn what it means to ‘not’ break the law. You develop hope in your soul to go out and not do what you used to do.” On the other hand, HP [8] is hopeful because he has observed the deleterious effects on others who do not have hope. He said: “To me, not having hope is not worthwhile. I look at others who walk with an aura of no hope, they’re miserable . . . I’ve got no time to be miserable . . . I’m in the habit of doing what’s positive.”

BR [5], who faces a very uncertain fate with respect to release, was disarmingly direct in explaining how he maintains his hope in what most would find extremely discouraging circumstances. He said: “Honestly, I might die here . . . but, my personal motto is like I am waiting at a bus stop. Sometimes, the bus will come and get me. Just got to wait my time and be patient. Hope is there because hope is now, mindfulness of the moment.”

*Plans or expectations for the future upon release from prison:* An important strategy or reason for being hopeful among ten of the interviewees was found to be keeping one’s focus on the future and planning for it. For example, WB [23] said that “some days, I can’t wait to get an opportunity to get out and apply what I learned.”

MK [4] has hope which he says results from “knowing that I have plans.” He recognizes that he must be flexible: “Plans will change. I try to change with them.” WB [7] focuses on his expected release date and is “real hopeful” because, he says, “I feel I’ll be out before I’m 60. I’ll still be able to work, still in good health.” Another interviewee, MN [9], also keeps his focus on his expected release date, but in the case that things don’t go as planned, he knows that “there was a guy at 50 years when he made parole.” He recalls the advice that this fellow inmate gave him which was, “Never give up hope!”

Others are more specific in the future visions that spring hope. CG [18] stays hopeful by imagining and planning the development of a program to serve the needs of youth. He states, “I want to set up a program where they can feel the truth that someone does care about them outside school, besides the teachers.” KP [19] has a plan for the future rooted in his past: “I look at how I succeeded before I came in here and that keeps me afloat.” After release, he intends to be “going back to school, getting a job, finding a place, an apartment.”

## Discussion

### *Spirituality Among Leaders Behind Bars*

One of the primary conclusions of this study is that pro-social leaders at the prison where the study was conducted are very likely to have some type of guiding faith or philosophy in their lives. When asked, “[d]o you consider yourself to be religious, spiritual, both, or neither?” 21 of 23 participants said they were at least one. This is in an environment where such beliefs are the minority position. The two who did not identify as such rejected both terms in favor of a “way of life.”

Thus all 23 participants expressed involvement in some faith group, sometimes more than one. Nearly 2/3 of the subjects (i.e., 14 of 23) claimed Christianity, but 5 other faiths were also mentioned. Three folks expressed belief in a combination of belief systems. This wide array would be potentially broader if all faiths had organized services here, which is not the case. Within the faiths accounted for, there was also a wide range of interpretations and practices.

Therefore, it is evident that it is not a particular belief system that makes leaders out of these men. It does appear, though, that a pro-social success story in this correctional facility often involves some sort of spiritual or religious involvement. This is noteworthy and should be explored further. While the snowball sampling utilized may have encouraged this and faith was a primary topic of interest, it was not a requirement. Hence, its ubiquitous presence is particularly notable.

Within this faith orientation, there was also a surprisingly strong preference for identifying as “spiritual” over “religious.” Fifteen of 23 said “spiritual” only, while three said “both,” and three others said solely “religious.” This preference reflects a somewhat surprising distinction between the two terms in the minds of the subjects. We preconceived use of the two terms to allow people to differentiate between organized religion and more personally specific belief systems. However, interviews made it clear that most leaders here associate with a traditional religious group, but consider themselves “spiritual.”

For some, the choice of “spiritual” was made because it was seen as more of a lifestyle, while religion was more a “performance.” In general, participants saw spirituality as more

encompassing, vibrant, and positive. Spirituality was also called a “relationship with Christ” [OM 4], “a connection” [RM 13], and “looking within myself” [DG 6].

Ultimately, the distinction between religion and spirituality can be interpreted as a logical outcome from the social and psychological circumstances. Many of these men have lived their lives wherein they have often had a hard time conforming to rules arbitrarily set by tradition so that aspect of “religion” may be discouraging. Additionally, formal religious organizations are likely linked to negative experiences with judgment and rejection during previous activities out of line with the law.

As part of this spirituality, about half of the participants (12 of 23) expressed a belief that things in life are “taken care of” according to a higher power’s plan. This unsolicited theme was a surprising revelation considering where the men find themselves despite now leading lives of positive leadership. However, it appears to be a common part of the belief of leaders behind bars.

For many of those expressing this belief, it appears to be a way of building their own strength in a tough situation, coping with the loss of freedom, an example of Clear and Myhre’s solace function. Believing in an ordained plan also repeatedly played an explanatory role, helping explain the mysteries of the universe (Clear and Myhre). WB [23] said, “I think the universe is alive. It always gives you what you need. Just gotta be open to receiving it. People, place, and things.” SH [20] explained, “Allah knows best. I can’t say where that purpose is. So for me to know my purpose here, only Allah can determine that, other than praising him and worshipping him.”

#### *What This Spirituality Involves and Provides*

In our examination of spirituality/religion among leaders behind bars, the most prominent and important emerging theme was the presence of both meaning and purpose. Every individual expressed the presence of both, a truly extraordinary finding considering the absence of such had previously been found to mark prison life (Maruna et al.; Black and Gregson). While a causal order here cannot be determined, the link appears to be strong between the circumstance of one holding to robust religious/spiritual belief systems and meaning/purpose. Since participants were selected for their evident success in the prison setting, this strongly supports Frankl’s contention that meaning and purpose are crucial to resiliency and survival in an oppressive environment.

The specific centrality of having a purpose in this setting is also noteworthy. While central to Frankl, it has almost never been examined in a correctional context. Thus, it is important to both knowledge and program development that we find it central to positive lives here. A previous examination (Reker) found purpose much less common behind bars than in general populations, even as it has been associated with self-concept, self-esteem, organizational skills, and a carefree mentality. Additionally, recently reported research on veterans (Parker-Pope) linked psychological resiliency to purpose, and this is certainly another group which must cope with institutionalization and trauma. Thus, this research strongly promotes the value of purpose and meaning as keys to maximizing life fulfillment behind bars.

The results suggest that meaning and purpose are likely even more central to the experience of faith in prison than previously suggested (Clear et al.) where it was but one

possible motivating factor. It also points to a more outsized prescriptive role (Clear and Myhre) and confirms finding meaning as a central product of sincere religious practitioners behind bars (Dammer).

The specific outlets of meaning and purpose varied considerably, and there emerged evident overlapping in the understandings of the two terms among participants. The details of these practices will be explored in future work. Still, their variety and basic patterns say much. Some were secular in nature. More often, they had a clearly faith-based orientation. Some purposes were personal, others collective. The breadth of foci is in line with the wide range of intrinsic meanings found in religious conversion previously (Clear et al.).

It is also highly noteworthy that, in an environment with persons long known for individualism and selfishness (Peyton), most of the descriptions of meaning and purpose were social in nature. In fact, one of the most noteworthy findings of this study was the unanimous degree to which serving others was central to the practices of these folks best navigating prison. Of all practices described, the most ubiquitous was helping others, with 22 of 23 participants, without prompting, volunteering their involvement in some sort of community service. Overall, this central service was intertwined with broader belief systems. Because this altruism has recently been found to aid resiliency (Parker-Pope) and has been found so central here, it has great potential value as an avenue to designing rehabilitative programming.

This service theme exemplifies the pro-social learning (O'Connor 2004) found to come with some prison conversions and often reflected the social and prescriptive roles of religion in prison (Clear and Myhre). Particularly among Muslim men, this charity filled an experiential role as an official duty of religious adherence. While these notions of service and pro-social benefits have been discussed in past studies, the degree of their centrality here is much more pronounced than previous studies have reported. As this study specifically examined exemplary individuals, this pre-eminence suggests that helping others behind bars may be key to helping oneself, too.

It also emerged during the interviews that the processes of getting to this point often involved a mentor or guiding figure. The theme of religious or spiritual mentorship was mentioned by a majority (13 of 23) of participants. For a few, this was a leader outside the walls. Usually, though, this mentorship involved peers behind bars.

This evidence of mentors as crucial is particularly noteworthy for policy purposes, as it has not been discussed adequately in the literature in relation to adult individuals while they remain in prison, but rather, for juveniles and those adult inmates who are returning home or are about to re-enter society. The influence of mentors may reflect the social attachment described as a possible element of faith behind bars (O'Connor 2004). It may also reflect an intrinsic motivation of seeking better relationships previously noted (Clear et al.).

Besides the unanimity of service, a common theme in the lives of these men was the focus on people outside of prison as a motivating factor. Twenty of 23 participants mentioned people beyond the walls as sources of positive feelings and perspectives. This central focus on loved ones or others on the outside as guiding lights is somewhat surprising. As people behind bars – that is to say, criminals, in general – are typically considered self-centered in their world views (Ronel). It may reflect the development of greater social attachment that comes from

religious conversion in prison (O'Connor 2004), but that is just one possible outcome in past studies, while it was clearly central in this group. Additionally, outside actors were mentioned also as a source of inner strength, peace, hope, and particularly meaning and purpose.

Furthermore, this finding is significant for its potential policy implications. While many correctional facilities are moving currently towards less contact with loved ones, this suggests that the greatest rehabilitative incentives and successes can come from the enhancement of relationships with people outside prison. Thus, greater access and contact should be developed, not less.

Despite the environment and stigmatization, and contrary to past findings (Mills and Kroner), these participants were unanimous in expressing hopefulness. This alone is noteworthy and appears to verify the value of meaning and purpose espoused by Frankl. It is almost astonishing in consideration of the fact that eight of these men have life sentences, 13 over 25 years, and 20 at least a decade. Fourteen have at least a decade remaining, and 15 have already served at least a decade, yet they are not in the throes of hopelessness.

Some of the hope expressed was a clear extension of the spiritual/religious beliefs these folks possess. In other cases, the hope had overtly secular roots. Either way, their hope appears intimately related to the collective lifestyles linking meaning, purpose, and faith. As such, this conforms and strengthens the value of the explanatory function and benefits to religion/spirituality in prison (Clear and Myhre), particularly the ability to provide solace and understanding.

In addition to hope, another emergent theme from the interviews was an excellent ability to cope – that is, resiliency. More than half of participants (13 of 23), without prompting, mentioned how they have learned to “accept the environment” [PM 11] or “roll wit’ the punches” [KY 14].

This ability always described, implicitly or explicitly, as having been developed since prison, a new-found part of their approaches to life. Often, it was specifically associated with religious or spiritual beliefs that developed here, as well. This echoes an intrinsic motivation for adopting religion from past research (Clear et al.). Additionally, this ability to accept the circumstances reflected sincere conversion (Dammer) and the explanatory function of those beliefs in this setting.

In such a traumatic, stressful setting, this coping ability is likely a great factor in the ability of these people to have become leaders. Without such resiliency, many here succumb and wallow when faced with perceived helplessness amidst daunting challenge. Yet, these individuals described having coped with the losses of intimate friends and family, among other grief.

#### *Changes Observed*

During these interviews, a number of changes emerge as common to the lives of participants since the advent of their current lifestyles and beliefs. Notably, these changes were not initial foci of the interviews, but became relevant quickly.

Collectively, the changes described by many of these individuals suggest that it was their beliefs and purposes developing after incarceration that were the impetus behind the current

“success,” rather than simply having been incarcerated. In fact, about two-thirds (16 of 23) independently mentioned that, even after being locked up, they continued to live hedonistic, criminal lifestyles behind bars, adopting a “prison mentality” rather than maintaining the “reality of who I really was” [DK 2]. This initial hedonism included a range of dangerous behaviors, including violence, drug abuse, and gambling.

However, it also emerged that, once finding their faith, it was generally more than just a component of life. Rather, nearly two-thirds (14 of 23) described their conversion as leading to a whole new way of life. The new life included the adoption of new traits and the explicit shedding of negative traits; the pattern of a complete lifestyle and mindset overhaul suggests that these men’s conversations were sincere (Dammer) and shows a greater intensity of the conversion (O’Connor 2004). It also confirms that a whole new life, as previously found, could itself be a motivating factor (O’Connor 2004).

Though this study was descriptive in nature, it would be useful for future researchers to test theoretical explanations of the turn toward spirituality and/or religion among the participants. One of the most widely cited theories about deviance is Gottfredson and Hirschi’s General Theory of Deviance (see Jones and Quisenberry). This theory holds that “crime and analogous behaviors stem from low self-control” and that the characteristics of low self-control generally “tend to show themselves in the absence of nurturance, discipline, or training.” In other words, low self-control stemmed from lack of these aspects of socialization during a person’s early years. Further, Gottfredson and Hirschi did not “expect the artificial environments available to the criminal justice system to have much impact” in improving self-control (94-95, 269). Clearly, in contrast to Gottfredson and Hirschi’s predictions, many of the participants in this study reported life-changing increases in self-control as a result of their finding meaning in spirituality and religion. While this certainly does not contradict Gottfredson and Hirschi’s expectations, it does suggest nuance and promotes future tests of circumstances potentially building self-control in a correctional facility.

Generally, all of these changes point to religion/spirituality as being prescriptive and offering a new way of life, especially among positive leaders behind bars. Still, the main roles of religion previously discussed (Clear and Myhre; O’Connor 2004) were evident among the subjects in this study. More broadly, the pro-social learning benefits of religion/spirituality seem to greatly improve *general* social functioning beyond simply following religious precepts. Thus, meaning, purpose, and hope in the experiences of the subjects of this study stand out as central to the changes they experienced after embracing religion/spirituality.

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