

**ANALELE ȘTIINȚIFICE  
ALE  
UNIVERSITĂȚII „ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” DIN IAȘI  
(SERIE NOUĂ)**

**SCIENTIFICAL ANNALS  
OF  
„ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” UNIVERSITY OF IAȘI  
(NEW SERIES)**

**SOCIOLOGIE  
ȘI ASISTENȚĂ SOCIALĂ  
SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK**

**TOM XII / Nr. 2**

**December 2019**



**Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași**

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(SERIE NOUĂ) SOCIOLOGIE ȘI ASISTENȚĂ SOCIALĂ**

**ISSN:** 2065-3131 (print); **ISSN:** 2066-8961 (online); **ISSN-L:** 2065-3131

The journal is edited by the Department of Sociology and Social Work, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences and is published by the Publishing House of „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iași.

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All submissions will undergo a peer-group review process.

The journal is published bi-annually. Number of copies / issue : 200 copies.

Web page: <http://anale.fssp.uaic.ro/index.php/asas>

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**Abstracting and indexing services:** *Scientific Annals of the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iasi (New Series). Sociology and Social Work Section* are covered by several major indexing services including: **EBSCO**, **PROQUEST CSA-Sociological Abstract**, **PROQUEST-Social Services Abstracts**, **PROQUEST-Worldwide Political Science Abstracts**, **CEEOL**, **Ulrich**, **IBSS**, **INDEX COPERNICUS**, **SCIOPIO** and **CNCIS** (2008-2011: **B+** category).

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## Religion in Prison. Some Results from Research in a Romanian Maximum Safety Penitentiary

Marina APOSTOL<sup>1</sup>, Adrian NETEDU<sup>2</sup>

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### **Abstract**

The prisoners' religious practices have become an important study topic to the extent that they can have consequences for personal change or social integration of those in a prison environment. Various research has identified for example the increase of the prosocial behaviours of those imprisoned in direct connection with religious belief or even the religious conversion. A significant influence can have religious services in prisons as well as the constant presence of priests among detainees. In this article, we present a series of data observed in exploratory research carried out in a maximum safety penitentiary from Romania. The research aimed to identify the practices and level of religiosity of detainees according to the gravity of the acts committed and to what extent they are appealing to the services of priests and psychologists.

**Key-terms:** prison, religious practices, level of religiosity, counselling.

### **Résumé**

Les pratiques religieuses des incarcérés sont devenues un sujet d'étude important dans la mesure où elles peuvent avoir des conséquences sur le changement personnel ou l'intégration sociale de ceux qui se trouvent dans l'environnement carcéral. Diverses recherches ont mis en évidence l'augmentation des comportements pro-sociaux des personnes emprisonnées en lien direct avec leurs convictions religieuses ou même leur conversion religieuse. Une influence significative peut avoir des services religieux dans les prisons ainsi que la présence constante de prêtres parmi les détenus. Dans cet article, nous présentons une série de données observées lors d'une recherche exploratoire réalisée dans un pénitencier à sécurité maximale de Roumanie. Le but de la recherche était d'identifier les pratiques et le niveau de religiosité des détenus en fonction de la gravité des actes commis et la mesure dans laquelle ils font appel aux services de prêtres et de psychologues.

**Mots-clé:** prison, pratiques religieuses, niveau de religiosité, conseils.

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### **Rezumat**

Practicile religioase ale deținuților au devenit un subiect important de studiu în măsura în care acestea pot avea consecințe în ce privește schimbarea personală sau integrarea socială a celor aflați în mediul carceral. Cercetări diverse au identificat de exemplu creșterea comportamentelor prosociale ale celor încarcerați în directă legătură cu credința religioasă sau chiar convertirea religioasă a deținuților. O influență semnificativă pot avea și serviciile religioase din închisori precum și prezența constantă a preoților printre deținuți. În acest articol prezentăm o serie de date observate în cadrul unei cercetări de explorare efectuată într-un penitenciar de maximă siguranță din România. Scopul cercetării a fost acela de a identifica practicile și nivelul de religiozitate al deținuților în funcție de gravitatea actelor comise și în ce măsură aceștia apelează la serviciile preoților sau psihologilor.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** penitenciar, practici religioase, nivel de religiozitate, consiliere.

### **Introduction**

The causal relationship between religion and social behaviours can be studied and extended and for the correctional environment. In this case, we can discuss two levels of religiosity in prison (Clear *et al.* 2000): individual level (for personal/subjective experience) and group level (religiosity influenced by a social network connexion). On the other hand, the cited authors resume the well-known dichotomy of G. Allport (1950) after which there is two religious orientations valid for anyone: intrinsic (generated by religious beliefs) and extrinsic (generated by instrumental or utilitarian benefits). Clear *et al.* (2000) appreciate that in the case of inmates - from the intrinsic perspective - they are confronted with the following challenges: dealing with guilt, finding a new way of life, dealing with the loss, especially with freedom. From the extrinsic perspective, there are other challenges where religion can have an important contribution: personal safety, material comforts and social relations.

Kerley, Matthews, Blanchard (2005) have listed several research results about the influence of religion in everyday life: reductions in the likelihood of criminal activity and drug use, interpersonal congeniality or "niceness", improved psychological and physical well-being, comfort for those who face difficult life situations, participation in politics and political movements, formal volunteering. As an extension, the authors investigated "whether religiosity can reduce the incidence of antisocial behaviour in the special context of prison". The authors intended to question 875 inmates randomly selected from a population of 4313 (from Mississippi State Penitentiary). Finally, the rate of response was 45 per cent. Applying some regression models the authors conclude that "religiosity directly reduced the likelihood of arguing and indirectly reduced the likelihood of fighting" between inmates. In these conditions, the authors recommend faith-based prison programs which are centred on the promotion of prosocial behaviours.

We cited this research to highlight the fact that sociological research designed in prison is very diverse, starting from research questions, survey objectives, working assumptions or studied population. For example, K. R. Kerley

(2014) who studied 'religious faith' of the incarcerated persons and how she is use to adapting and surviving in difficult conditions was based in their research on the analysis of 203 in-depth interviews (from which 103 with inmates, 30 with prison ministry workers and 70 with residents of a faith-based halfway house). Likewise, the author explained the benefits of national faith-based programs in an American prison.

Some authors continue to investigate the extent to which religious involvement helps inmates to adapt to the prison environment. Thus *Clear et al.* (1992) applied an instrument called *Prisoner Values Survey* to measure prisoner's religious belief and behaviour, applied in 20 prisons from 12 states in the United States. The conclusion of the research was the next one: "in many ways, the prisoner's desire for religion is not very different from that of the free-world citizen. He/she seeks religion to make life more liveable. For some, life is improved by finding the emotional supports religion can supply. For others, religion provides an environmental support structure to help avoid the difficulties of prison society".

Other authors like Becci and Dubler (2017) insisted on the presence of chapels in prison which are meeting places, and stages for a fellowship of a more secular variety. In short, prison chapels play host to a lot more activity than mere religion in the narrowly-defined sense. Starting from these suggestions we can add the role of a psychologist in prison as G. Allport himself specified (1950).

In Romania, religious practices have been a constant part of the prison environment. The regulations for the functioning of prisons (from 1864, 1876, 1929, and 1938) provided all the conditions for the exercise of religious services. The collaboration between the church and the penitentiary was resumed after 1989 (Târle 2002).

The last protocol concluded between the Orthodox Romanian Church and the Penitentiary Directorate stipulates that the chaplain priest, besides conducting religious services and leading the Religious Assistance Bureau, is a spiritual adviser to the director, participates to the meetings of the Governing Council and is part of the parole board (Surugiu 2005).

Very close to our area of interest is the field of correctional psychology. In our field research we were interested in what measure the detainees appeal the psychologist at the same time as the priest or they are called in turn. If the specialized area of psychology can be used "to increase our understanding of prisoners, how they became involved in crime, and how they adapt to prison life" (Cooke *et al.* 1993) we can consider in future research all these complementary areas of interest.

## **2. Methods: participants, instruments**

Our research has been done in a maximum safety penitentiary from Iași, Romania. The research aimed to identify the practices and the declared level of religiosity of detainees according to the gravity of the acts committed and to what extent they are appealing to the services of priest and psychologist. We

applied 90 questionnaires (25 applied to prisoners in the closed regime, 25 for those in the open regime, 25 applied to prisoners under maximum security, and 15 for the semi-open regime). The period of data collection was between May 21 and 31, 2019. Subjects were notified of the purposes of the research to ensure that the data collected will be used for scientific purposes only and will remain confidential. Finally, we applied a semi-structured interview to the orthodox priest (49 years old, 19 years work in prison) and to one of the psychologists (27 years old, 3 years work in prison).

The population from the sample was structured as follows:

	conviction period	the period since incarceration
less than 1 year	6%	23%
1-3 years	13%	34%
3-5 years	19%	19%
5-10 years	29%	20%
10-20 years	29%	4%
life imprisonment	4%	

Age categories of the detainees were: 20-30 years (34%), 30-40 years (34%), 40-50 years (22%), 50-60 (6%), more than 60 years (4%). 34% of them were recidivists. The religious confession declared by the detainees in the sample was distributed as follows: Orthodox (88%), Catholic (8%) and other Christian denominations (3%). Only one subject declared himself an atheist. In this condition, the Orthodox priest is more visible than the Catholic and the single prison chapel has orthodox characteristics.

### 3. Results

We grouped our analysis in some different chapters:

#### *a. Declared ante and post-incarceration degree of religiosity*

To analyse the degree of religiosity ante-incarceration we constructed a statistical index named *anterelig* formed with six variables (going to church, to fast, reading religious books, pray, communion, confess to a priest). The *anterelig* index is a cumulative statistical index (adding 4 for 'several times a week' up to 0 for 'never'). With the other four dichotomous variables, we constructed a statistical index named *postrelig* - a cumulative index with a score between zero and four points (each positive answer received one point). Descriptive statistics of these indexes with 90 available cases is represented in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for the *anterelig* index and *postrelig* index

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>anterelig</i> index	90	0.00	4.00	2.09	0.93
<i>postrelig</i> index	90	0.00	4.00	2.53	1.41

With these two variables we tested the following hypothesis:

**H1.** The degree of declared religiosity before incarceration (*anterelig*) positively correlates with the degree of declared religiosity after incarceration (*postrelig*). From the data analysis, the hypothesis was confirmed: a degree of pre-incarceration religiosity correlates positively with an average intensity with the after-incarceration degree of religiosity (Spearman  $\rho = 0.489$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ).

**H2.** The degree of declared religiosity before incarceration and after incarceration positively correlates with the degree of declared religiosity of the family.

For this hypothesis, we constructed a statistical index named 'religiosity of the family' counted from other four dichotomous variables (consider your family a religious one, important religious holidays are respected in your family, prayer is practised in your family, do you have religious symbols in your family home) and named *familyrelig* (N=90, Mean=3.45, SD=0.58). After the data analysis, we observed that the declared level of religiosity of the family doesn't correlate with other two indexes (with *anterelig*  $\rho=0.199$ ,  $p=0.06$ ; with *postrelig*  $\rho=0.161$ ,  $p=0.08$ ). The hypothesis is not confirmed.

**H3.** The degree of declared religiosity after incarceration (*postrelig*) is associated with the period of the punishment.

For the analysis, we recoded the variable 'period of the punishment' in three categories: up to 3 years, 3-10 years, over 10 years. From the statistical analysis with Kruskal-Wallis H. nonparametric test, we noticed that the degree of religiosity declared by the detainees is not significantly different after the conviction period (H (3) =5.01,  $p=0.081$ ). However, I we noticed a steady increase in religiosity as the incarceration period increase, but there are no significant statistical differences. The hypothesis is not confirmed.

**H4.** The degree of declared religiosity after incarceration (*postrelig*) is associated with the type of penitentiary regime.

The penitentiary regime has four categories (open, semi-open, closed and maximum security) and reflects on an ascending scale the severity of the committed acts. From the statistical analysis with Kruskal-Wallis H. nonparametric test, we noticed that the degree of religiosity declared by the detainees is not significantly different after the categories of the penitentiary regime. (H (3) =2.79,  $p=0.425$ ). The hypothesis is not confirmed but we observed the constant growth of the mean rank between these four regime categories: 40.24, 42.87, 46.08 and 51.76. In other words, the statistical test confirms that this increase in religiosity is too slow to have significant differences between categories. The hypothesis is not confirmed.

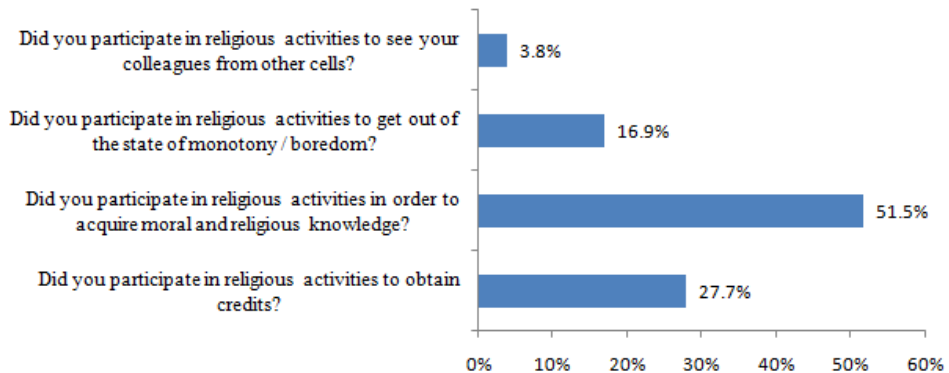
**H5.** There are significant differences in the degree of declared religiosity after incarceration (*postrelig*) depending on being recidivist or not.

Using the Mann Whitney test we decide that there are no significant differences between the recidivist or non-recidivist categories [ $U=902$ ,  $z=-0.110$ ,  $p=0.913$ ]. The hypothesis is not confirmed.

Finally, we draw the attention that all these results are available just for our sample.

*b. Intrinsic vs. extrinsic religiosity*

The auto-declaration of religiosity is marked by the already mentioned religious dichotomy: intrinsic (generated by religious beliefs) and extrinsic (generated by instrumental or utilitarian benefits). We questioned the detainees and the results are in Graphic 1:



Graphic 1. Percentages of some intrinsic/extrinsic motivations of religious practices

The detainees declared that ‘moral and religious knowledge’ is in the centre of their religiosity pattern but while 27.7% recognized the fact that they participate to obtain credits. The subtle dialogue between the extrinsic and the intrinsic religious motivations and our previous assumptions shows us that it is difficult to identify to what extent the degree of religiosity can be objectively measured. In conclusion, we can be reserved with those declared by the prison priest according to whom there is “a significant increase in prisoners' interest in religious life. This increase in the degree of appreciation of the role of faith knows a different evolution depending on the type of crimes committed by the prisoners. Thus, those who are convicted of particularly serious acts have a greater increase in the importance given to religious participation”. After the tested hypothesis (H1 to H5) on our sample, we cannot be sure about this previous sentence (who is based on the profound specific relations between the priest and the detainees): there are certainly cases that confirm those declared by the priest but we cannot generalize.

The level of declared religiosity remains high if we referred to the percentages obtained to the degree of acceptance of some common beliefs to religious practitioners (see Table 2).



**Table 2.** Percentages of ‘yes’ from the next items of the religious faith

Do you believe ...	Percentages for detainees	The percentage from IRES research
... that there is God	95%	96%
... in life after death	59%	64%
... in the existence of Heaven	81%	75%
... in angels	84%	85%
... in the existence of Hell	64%	66%
... in the existence of Devil	27%	66%
... in sin	78%	89%

These percentages from *Table2* confirmed the data from a research made by IRES (2015) on a representative sample in Romania which show us a very high level of the declared religiosity of Romanians.

*c. Dialogues with the priest and the alternative to calling the psychologist*

Even if the level of religiosity of the detainees is high, not only the priest is approached for various personal problems. Moreover, the persons to whom the detainees appeal in various situations were indicated by the respondents as follows in Table 3:

**Table 3.** People called in difficult situations

	<b>Per cent</b>
Cell colleague	24%
Social worker	48%
Educator	38%
Priest	42%
Psychologist	63%

We can understand the role of the psychologist due to the complex functions played: to provide counselling, to assist eventually treatment plan for clinical disorders or to aid for a social integration after leaving prison. One of these psychologists gave us a statement of principle about the relationship with detainees: “I always try to look at them as normal people, and not from the deed, because otherwise, I could not work as a psychologist with them.” The same psychologist told us that any form of empathy for prisoners can be misinterpreted and that is why the responsibilities of the prison psychologist are different from those who work in other environments. On the other hand, the interviewed psychologist emphasized the personal role “to assessing the needs and risks based on which we determine whether there is a risk to one's person, to the inmates' colleagues, but also the security of detention”. If the detainees are implied in some specific activities (institutionally organized) they can receive credits. The same psychologist thought that there “is an extrinsic motivation (to get credits, get out of the room, tick off activities), then through intervention one

reaches the intrinsic motivation". The same process is with the activities organized by the church, activities characterized by the priest like a "new humanism" (in which the person deprived of liberty is defined by freedom and responsibility in front of self and community). In the acceptance of the interrogated priest their mission is much more complex than that of a parish because, besides the liturgical activity on Sundays and holidays, he carries out daily and a rich activity of moral-religious education.

Cross-interviewed, priest and psychologist admitted that religious and psychological counselling are complementary even if there are detainees who prefer only one of them. But some of the detainees practice both. In this case, for our sample we tested another hypothesis:

**H6.** The more detainees turn to the psychologist, the less they will call the penitentiary priest.

To verify if the detainees who appeal to the psychologist are appealing to a large extent to the priest, we have applied the  $\chi^2$  association test. From the analysis of the data, it was found that the variable 'call to the psychologist' is not associated with the variable 'call to the priest' [ $\chi^2(1) = 0.029, p = 0.864$ ]. In other words, most who call on the psychologist does not turn to the priest of the penitentiary. From the data analysed, I noticed that only 30% of the respondents' appeal to both.

#### **4. Conclusion and discussions**

Sociological measurement of the level of religiosity in the prison environment is a difficult task due to the multiple intervening variables. From the beginning, we tested to what extent the current religiosity of the inmates correlates with a certain personal level of religiosity before incarceration and we obtained a positive correlation with medium intensity. However, these types of religiosity do not correlate with the religiosity of the entire family of the prisoner. One of the things obtained from the interviews was that the degree of religiosity is higher for those who are locked up for longer periods. Strictly verified on the research sample, this fact has not been confirmed, but it is possible to check on large samples. The same situation is also in the case of testing the association between religiosity and the type of prison regime or following the differences between being recidivist or not. Finally, our research aims to clarify the dichotomy intrinsic/extrinsic religiosity, knowing that detainees can obtain a series of credits by participating in a series of formal activities initiated by the prison priest. The credits can also be obtained if the detainees participate in activities initiated by the prison psychologist. Finally, I noticed that most detainees prefer to call either the priest or the psychologist and only a minority appeal to both (a possible explanation being the specific differences regarding the specialized intervention in prison).

We consider that such research must be deepened and enriched with other qualitative sociological techniques, this to avoid the main vulnerability we

assumed: we could only measure the 'declared' level of religiosity and not the 'effective' level (which can be quantified for example by direct field observation or by the participant-observer technique).

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