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Studies on Religion and Recidivism: Focus on Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan

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This research article raises the question of whether religion can be considered a viable partner in the reduction of the high rate of recidivism associated with the increasing mass incarceration in the United States. Can sustainable transformation in the life of a prisoner or former prisoner as a result of religious conversion be subjected to evidenced-based practices to derive impartial conclusions about the value of religion in their lives? With a particular focus on three neighborhoods of Boston—Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan—this study examines the relevance of religion and faith-based organizations in lowering the high rate of recidivism associated with incarceration in the prisons of the Massachusetts Department of Correction. This research was undertaken by The Center for Church and Prison, Inc.

The Center for Church and Prison is a resource and research center working toward community revitalization through prison reform and economic mobility for former prisoners. Our goal is to advocate for strategic solution development and intervention based on evidence-based modules as fundamental to the holistic process of successful reintegration of prisoners and former prisoners. The center argues that prison reform, rehabilitation, education, and economic mobility are strategically integral to decreasing the high rates of incarceration and recidivism in the American prison system.

In 2009, The Center for Church and Prison embarked upon survey research to determine the socioeconomic and existential implications of the high rate of incarceration of blacks from the communities of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan in state prisons. The primary purpose was to determine the potential role of faith-based organizations as partners in reducing recidivism.

Churches were the most likely places to conduct the survey because many individuals and families affected by the sociopolitical, economic, and existential implications of the incarceration rate of blacks go to church on Sunday mornings in majority black communities. In addition, the notion of "other worldliness" and the conceptual propagation of such understandings often befog the existential awareness of the worshippers sitting in the pews on Sunday morning, caught as they are in everyday concerns about socioeconomic and felt realities. In executing this research in churches during the Sunday services, we were certain that pastors, priests, and religious leaders would be interested in the survey findings as well as the diverse responses of congregants.

The written questionnaire sought to assess the impact of incarceration on Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan; the extent churches are involved in remedying the impact of black incarceration in those neighborhoods; how much interest in the issue of incarceration and recidivism their congregants have; and to what extent their interest is translated into strategic solution development and intervention. Finally, respondents were asked what they think their churches should do about the problem.

The survey findings show how common it is for residents of those three neighborhoods to know someone who is incarcerated, with convictions on drug offenses the leading cause of imprisonment. The congregants indicated many of their churches already have anticrime programs of some sort. More respondents showed interest in having their church establish a reentry program than those who reported their congregation already runs one.

This article begins by citing national statistics on mass incarceration in the United States as a broader context for data on race-related rates of incarceration within the Massachusetts Department of

Correction system and then providing a background analysis of those figures. They are followed by a demographic description of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan.

National Statistics

The United States has 5 percent of the world's population but 25 percent of the world's incarcerated population. There are more than 7.3 million individuals on parole, probation, in jail, in prison, or under some form of correctional supervision across the country. The number of prison and jail inmates alone exceeds 2.3 million. The racial statistics are glaring: Blacks, Hispanics, and poor whites comprise most of the incarcerated population. Blacks and Hispanics account for more than 60 percent of the correction-supervised and incarcerated population. Blacks and Hispanics make up less than 30 percent of the country's total population, so they are disproportionately incarcerated. The incarceration rate of black women is three times higher than that of Hispanic and white women. Black men comprise more than 42 percent of the correction-supervised population. Black youths make up half of the juvenile justice population in America. Blacks are 13 percent of the United States population but more than half of the incarceration and correctional population of the United States (Correction, *Massachusetts Department of Correction Prison Population Trends 2010,* August 2011).

This trend of disproportionate racial incarceration is reflected in state facilities across the nation. This study acknowledges the disproportionate rate of three groups: Blacks, Hispanics, and poor whites. This article is centered on the implications of the high rate of incarceration of blacks in the Massachusetts state prisons by looking at the highly populated areas of black residence in Boston: Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan.

Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan: Demographic Description

According to the 2010 Census, the largest numbers of blacks in Massachusetts are concentrated in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. John Logan and Brian Stults in a US 2010 Project report titled, *The Persistence of Segregation in the Metropolis: New Findings from the 2010 Census*, ranks Boston as the eleventh most segregated metropolis

in 2010. (Logan, March 24, 2011). Thanks to James Jennings of Tufts University for the following statistics taken from his report, *A Select Demographic and Community Profile* from the *2011 State of Black Boston.*

Based on the *2011 State of Black Boston* analysis of the 2006-2008 American Community Survey/3-Year Estimates (Bureau, April 2009), the following categories have been derived as organizing principles for increasing crime, violence, incarceration, and recidivism evident in the perpetual cycle of blacks in Massachusetts prisons.

Decline in Black Marriage and Family Structures: "One third (33.6%) of all Black families in Boston are married-couple families....Female householder families with no spouse present comprise the majority of family types among Blacks (55.4%) and Latinos (52.7%) compared to 22.2% for White families, and 21.1% of all Asian families" (Jennings, 2011).

Low Educational Attainment: "More than one fifth (21.5%) of all Blacks over 25 years of age reported not having a high school diploma; the figure for Latinos/as is 37.0%, and for Asians it is 26.9%. Only 11.9% of all Blacks in this age category, and 9.7% of all Latinos, have a bachelor's degree" (Jennings, 2011).

High Rate of Unemployment: "Blacks comprised one fifth (21.3%) of the total population 16 years and over (or 108,807 Blacks out of 510,607 persons), but 55% (or 14,363 persons) of the total unemployed civilian labor force (26,079 persons) during the 2006-2008 period...The median income of Black households, and Latino households, is significantly lower than that of White households. Black median household income is $33,420, making it more than $30,000 less than White median income at $63,980" (Jennings, 2011). The employment characteristics reflect a persistent indicator of concentrated forms of unemployment serving as underlying factors in high rates of impoverishment, crime, and incarceration. These persistent levels of concentrated unemployment are also reflected in the income levels associated with these communities.

Concentrated Forms of Poverty: "More than one fifth (22.5%) of all Black families, and 25.2% of all Black persons were reported as impoverished; this compares to 7.1% for White families, and 13.8% for White persons...There are 47 census tracts with unemployment

levels of 9% or higher: the predominantly Black neighborhoods of Roxbury, South Dorchester, and Mattapan contain more than half (25) of all such census tracts.... More than one fifth of all Black households (22.0%), and 26.5% of all Latino households, and 11.9% of all Asian households receive food stamp benefits. A relatively low 6.3% of all White households receive food stamp benefits" (Jennings, 2011).

The above categories provide the salient conditions for crime, incarceration, and the high rate of recidivism. According to Andrea Leverentz, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts Boston, black disproportionality in the Massachusetts Department of Correction is inherently due to factors that include "structural inequality,... disadvantaged Black communities and also discrimination and bias within the criminal justice system,...racial patterns of economic inequality; segregated Black communities often have greater concentrations of the community disadvantages that are related to violent crime than do White communities. In addition, these types of concentrated disadvantages inhibit a community's ability to control crime. Incarceration patterns, long-term consequences of incarceration, and stereotypes of offenders all exacerbate social inequalities" (Leverentz, 2011).

The following statistics also highlight the numbers on crime, release, and reentry associated with blacks in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan.

Crime, Punishment, and Reentry: In Massachusetts, Hispanics are 9.7 percent of population but 27 percent of the incarcerated population. Blacks are 6.6 percent of the Massachusetts population but close to 35 percent of the Massachusetts incarcerated population, including the overwhelming number black juveniles in Massachusetts juvenile facilities. Hispanics and blacks combined are less than 15 percent of the state population, but they make up more than 55 percent of the incarcerated population *(Correction, A Ten-Year Trend Analysis of Race/Ethnicity (2002-2011)*, 2012).

 Nationally, nearly 650,000 people are released from prisons each year. Over 7 million are released from jails. Approximately two out of every three prisoners released are rearrested within three years. Over the last 20 years, the number of people released from prison increased 350 percent. Approximately 95 percent of state prisoners will

be released back to their communities at some point, according to the Urban Institute Justice Policy 2008 Research Report.

 "Incarceration and release trends in Massachusetts generally mirror this growth. Between 1980 and 2006, the Massachusetts state adult prison population increased more than threefold—from 2,754 to 9,405 individuals. The number of people being released from Massachusetts state prisons has also increased substantially. In 1980, Massachusetts released 1,015 individuals from the state's prisons. Over the past two and a half decades, this number more than doubled to 2,337 individuals" (Brooks, April 2008).

Reflecting on the area of criminal justice, the *2011 State of Black Boston* report highlights the disproportionate rate of incarceration in relation to the disproportionate rate of crime in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. The report highlights the rate of violent crime committed in the districts of B2 Roxbury/Mission Hill, B3 Mattapan/North Dorchester, and C11 Dorchester, with the focus on police crime reports in 2008. With the high rate of crime in these districts leading to high rates of incarceration, conclusions from the report reveal that blacks were not only arrested and incarcerated for violent crimes but for nonviolent drug-related crimes as well. The distinction between violent and nonviolent crime is important: the high rates of incarceration of blacks in Massachusetts and across the United State are systematically due to nonviolent drugs offenses. This concern is reflected in the disproportionate rate of sentencing and incarceration of blacks for crack cocaine in Massachusetts, reflecting the rest of the country (Leverentz, 2011).

On reentry, the statistics are glaringly predictive. Prisoners are going to be released eventually; the time and place for their release is somewhat secondary to their preparation for reintegration. The rate at which prisoners return to their communities varies across the nation, with more than 600,000 former prisoners released annually (Leverentz, 2011).

In 2008, 2,719 inmates were released from the Massachusetts Department of Corrections…Twenty percent of those released reported an address in Suffolk County, which also had the highest concentration of releases at

76 per 100,000 residents…. Twenty-nine percent of men and 12 percent of women released from the DOC in 2008 are Black. A majority (72%) was never married and their average age at release was 35.5 years. (Leverentz, 2011)

According to the Massachusetts Department of Correction *Quarterly Report on Admission and Releases-Fourth Quarter 2012*, i.e., Trend Period: Fourth Quarter, 2010, through Fourth Quarter, 2012:

Over the previous nine quarters the cumulative total admissions were 23,156 and the cumulative total releases were 23,235, with the cumulative difference between admissions and releases resulting in a decrease of 147 inmates….Criminal releases due to the drug lab situation totaled 261 inmates during the third and fourth quarters of 2012. The majority of releases, 68.2%, were during October 2012. Suffolk County made up the most common release community, receiving 53.6% of the drug lab releases. (Correction, *Quarterly Report on Admission and Releases in the Massachusetts Department of Correction: Fourth Quarter 2012*, January 2013)

Religion's Role in Reducing Recidivism

In his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* philosopher and psychologist William James defines religion as a "private experience" mainly informed by individual religious experience. He writes, "Religion…shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude; so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual…." (James, 1902). In his rejection of institutional religion, James emphasized the value of experiencing the "divine" in the quietness and solitude of religious experience reflected in "fruitful" actions. He believed religion is grounded in action that is reflected in character transformation and character development. Conversion for James is fundamentally important to the religious experience because the religious experience itself is inherent to the conversion experience for the individual in relation to the divine. The "Divine" in this context is personal, experiential,

and immediate to the individual in his or her particular existential experience and angst. Religion, for James, is inherently "transformative," mentally and emotionally stabilizing (James, 1902). In this context, religion can be seen as effecting changes in the individual's life from indulgences in negative behavior to gravitation toward positive religious and social behaviors. James's analysis of religious experience as transformative can be largely perceived as an individual process of transformation. On a social structural level, with respect to individual/community transformation, religion and religious experience can be viewed as effecting individual transformation from a holistic perspective. In this context, we can begin to view religion and religious experience as vital to the holistic reintegration process of the former inmate—a process that begins behind bars.

This research is an attempt to develop the preliminary data and findings to establish the link between the high rate of incarceration of blacks and its socioeconomic and existential implications, at the same time highlighting the role of religion as a potential partner in the reduction of the high rate of recidivism.

Methodology

The collection of the data for this survey follows the pattern of nonrandom or nonprobability sampling. Individuals volunteered their time, while others were simply present during the survey period. With the focus on qualitative data development, religious settings were considered ideal to collect data on Sunday morning since these settings tend to have a diverse collection of individuals with diverse experience associated with the research topic.

Five hundred surveys were distributed, with 349 respondents answering the survey questions. Surveys were randomly distributed during the church service at the discretion of the presiding pastor. Individuals surveyed were 97.3 percent African/African American/black, 1.2 percent white, and 1.2 percent Hispanic/Latino. All respondents had some level of education and first- or second-hand experience with the issue of mass incarceration. Twenty percent had master's degrees, 34 percent had undergraduate degrees, 25.5 percent had high school diplomas, and 2.3 percent held doctorates. The respondents were better educated than adult blacks in Boston as a whole.

Respondents fielded 16 questions, and the surveys were conducted in 11 churches in Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury. Questions covered areas of personal and job identities, church relationship, relationship to the person or persons imprisoned, socioeconomic and health impacts of incarceration, nature of the crime committed, and finally prescriptive and proactive ways their churches could intervene. The survey was conducted from July 2009 to 2010 in the following churches:

1. Eliot Church
2. Charles Street AME
3. Kingdom Power
4. Revival Time
5. Ray of Hope Christian Church
6. First Church of Nazarene
7. Grace Church of All Nations
8. Greater Love Tabernacle
9. Twelfth Baptist Church
10. Bethel AME Church
11. Morning Star Baptist Church

Survey Findings

Individuals Behind Bars

More than half of the respondents, 54 percent, knew someone who was imprisoned at the time. This finding reflects the pervasiveness of mass incarceration and its long-term impact on the lives of individuals and families in these neighborhoods. Fewer than half of those surveyed indicated that the person behind bars was a friend, relative, or acquaintance.

Socioeconomic Impacts

- 28 percent indicated that the relative behind bars had been the breadwinner.
- 20 percent reported a reduced family income and standard of living.
- 18 percent said single parenting resulted.
- Almost 12 percent reported someone had dropped out of school as a result.
- 20 percent reported a lack of income, with almost 7 percent evicted.

These socioeconomic and existential consequences of the high and disproportionate rate of incarceration of blacks in these areas have cumulative, long-term implications.

An obvious implication is the correlation between concentrated rates of poverty and long-term propagation of intrinsic forms of poverty associated with individuals and families in the communities of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. This research parallels a study done by the Pew Charitable Trusts regarding the long-term economic "incapacitation" as a result of incarceration. In its 2010 report *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effects on Economic Mobility,*[1] Pew looked at the intersection between incarceration and economic mobility. It discovered that incarceration fundamentally makes it difficult for former inmates to experience any appreciable form of economic mobilization. Worst of all, not only is the former inmate faced with this dilemma, but the family also suffers the severe economic realities of the former inmate. In addition to the loss of skills and wages, incarceration perpetuates social stigmatization and marginalization. The report concludes that

INCARCERATION NEGATIVELY AFFECTS FORMER INMATES' ECONOMIC PROSPECTS.
- Serving time reduces hourly wages for men by approximately 11 percent, annual employment by 9 weeks, and annual earnings by 40 percent.
- By age 48, the typical inmate will have earned $179,000, less than if he had never been incarcerated.

FORMER INMATES EXPEREINCE LESS UPWARD ECONOMIC MOBILITY THAN THOSE WHO WERE NEVER INCARCERATED.
- Of the former inmates who were in the lowest fifth of the male earnings distribution in 1986, two thirds remained on the bottom rung in 2006, twice the number of those who were not incarcerated.
- Only 2 percent of previously incarcerated men who started in the bottom fifth of the earnings distribution made it to the top fifth 20 years later, compared to 15 percent of men who started at the bottom but were never incarcerated.

THE IMPACTS OF INCARCERATION REACH FAR BEYOND FORMER INMATES TO THEIR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

- 54 percent of inmates are parents with minor children (age 0-17), including more than 120,000 mothers and 1.1 million fathers.
- 2.7 million children have a parent behind bars—1 in every 28 children (3.6 percent) has a parent incarcerated, up from 1 in 125 just 25 years ago. Two-thirds of these children's parents were incarcerated for nonviolent offenses.
- One in 9 African American children (11.4 percent), 1 in 28 Hispanic children (3.5 percent), and 1 in 57 white children (1.8 percent) have an incarcerated parent.

A CHILD'S PROSPECT OF UPWARD ECONOMIC MOBILITY IS NEGATIVELY AFFECTED BY THE INCARCERATION OF A PARENT.

- Children with fathers who have been incarcerated are significantly more likely than other children to be expelled or suspended from school (23 percent compared with 4 percent).
- Family income averaged over the years a father is incarcerated is 22 percent lower than family income was the year before a father is incarcerated. Even in the year after the father is released, family income remains 15 percent lower than it was the year before incarceration. (Pew, 2010)

The number of incarcerated inmates has ballooned from half a million in 1980 to more than 2.3 million inmates in 2013 in the United States. The prison population exceeds the population of some major cities in the United States and countries in the world. The post-civil rights era has seen a phenomenal increase in the rate of incarceration with prison becoming an "increasingly predictable destination," especially for black men (Pew, 2010). The economic disadvantage associated with incarceration has over the decades been reflected in the impoverished conditions of most black communities across America. Serving time has its obvious economic consequences and grave implications.

Incarceration and Mental Health Illness and Suicide

- Almost 10 percent of survey respondents reported incarceration led to mental illness.

- Nearly 11 percent reported depression/attempted suicide resulted.

    It is important to take into consideration these numbers regardless of how insignificant they may appear. Studies have shown a remarkable increase in mental health issues in the black community related to the psychological implications of mass incarceration and its shaping of the black psychological and existential experiences.

    One question asked respondents to identify by kinship status the incarcerated relative. The responses varied. The importance of this question was to determine the highest number of immediate relatives from Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan of families behind bars.

- Brother: 5 percent
- Sister: Less than 1 percent
- Father: Less than 1 percent
- Mother: Less than a half percent
- Friend: 23 percent
- Cousin: 6 percent
- Grandson: Less than 1 percent
- Nephew: 5 percent

    The largest category was "others." Based on gender stratification of the above responses, most of the incarcerated relatives were men. The age varies as much as their marital and parental status. The figures underscore national statistics on the high rate of incarceration of men. Not only are the majority of the respondents acknowledging the incarceration of their male relatives or of friends of unspecified gender, since 97 percent of the respondents identified themselves racially as black, it is logical to conclude that the males identified are overwhelmingly black. Altogether 93 percent indicated that there were social impacts from the incarceration of their relative. Those ranged from children entering foster care to job loss or other personal problems.

Nature of Crimes Committed

    Another question asked, What was the crime committed? Of 14 different kinds of crimes reported, drug offenses were the most frequent (45%), followed by murder (22%). The prevalence of drug convictions among blacks parallels national data. According to the Sentencing Project, blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be ar-

rested and convicted in the War on Drugs. They are most likely to be sentenced to longer and harsher sentences than their white counterparts. Reported murders are less numerous in Boston each year, but those convicted are behind bars for longer periods. Most murders reported in Boston occur in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, according to the *2011 State of Black Boston* report (Leverentz, 2011).

The favored approach to the community reducing the impact of mass incarceration is to focus on children by talking to them (51 percent) and focusing on their education (47 percent). About 38 percent suggested reducing the pervasiveness of "thug life," and 31 percent suggested monitoring the media's influence in the community. These concerns include the influence of negative news media reporting about Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. Negative journalistic reporting fails to cover the positive activities and accomplishments of the inhabitants of these areas and perpetuates stereotypes of the neighborhoods.

Religion as a Strategic Partner in Reducing Recidivism

The survey was taken with the goal of beginning a process of dialogue around strategic solution development and intervention. This survey yielded data highlighting the empirical need for such strategies. The next set of questions was designed to develop the data necessary to discuss the role of churches and faith-based organizations in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. The involvement of churches in reducing recidivism is pivotal to the entire process of adequate reintegration and prison reform.

- 43 percent reported that their church did have crime-reduction programs.
- 39 percent said their church had a prison ministry.
- 15 percent reported a family enrichment program.
- 12 percent indicated their church had a GED program.
- 11 percent reported a Christian residential substance abuse program.
- 8 percent had a program for violence prevention/reduction and anger management.
- 5 percent reported reentry workshops and seminars.

Ascertaining the validity of the above findings is beyond the purview of this survey. (Some members of the same church provided contradictory answers.) It is clear that some of these 11 churches are engaged in some form of rehabilitation and reintegration program, but with less emphasis on consistent follow-up. Only 5 percent of the parishioners said their church has a reentry program. Yet, 13 percent suggested their church should have one. Almost half of the churchgoers (44 percent) are interested in having their church host a strategy session on how to reduce mass incarceration. That finding indicates a high level of interest in working on the problem. Most of the other respondents did not answer the question, perhaps indicating their uncertainty about what their ministers would do.

In his 2000 thesis, *The Significance of Christianity in 'Reforming' Prisoners*, Arthur J. Bolkas reported on his research designed to determine the level of transformation in the lives 45 inmates and 15 former prisoners. Positively, the study concluded the following:

> Christian prisoners/ex-prisoners believed that being a Christian made a qualitative difference to life in prison, offering essential hope, meaning and purpose in life, a positive outlook, and productive use of time. Christianity provided a different way of life, with new morals, values, and a renewed sense of self that helped overcome guilt and generally enhanced relationships. Belonging to a religious group provided practical and moral/spiritual support, which assisted prison adjustment and personal security. Moreover, Christian inmates had more self-control and tolerance/respect (than they ordinarily would) for authorities and others, resulting in fewer institutional rule violations. (Bolkas, 2000)

On the negative side, the research discovered that inmates who experienced genuine conversion in prison "were often vilified and victimised by staff and inmates alike, whilst the negative environment and unresolved personal problems caused hardships, faith related doubts/insecurities, temptations, and moral lapses" (Bolkas, 2000). The research also discovered a peculiar challenge

for the converted former inmate, one associated with the question of intentional program development to facilitate adequate rehabilitation and reintegration of the former inmates upon their release from prison. "The findings reveal that released prisoners experience dual difficulties of community reintegration *and* church assimilation—going from one extreme subculture (the prison) to another (the church). Displaced and vulnerable, whilst retaining faith in God, many struggled to live it out— occasionally reoffending. Thus, whereas Christianity was shown to have a salutary effect on Christian prisoners/ex-prisoners generally, lack of adequate support had the potential to thwart its rehabilitative potential" (Bolkas, 2000).

Bolkas's positive conclusions are also highlighted by the Prison Fellowship. Started in 1976 by Chuck Colson, an aide to Richard Nixon convicted in the Watergate scandal and an Evangelical Christian leader, the Prison Fellowship argues that religious conversion in the life of the former inmate can serve as a cogent means of reducing recidivism. Based on measurable outcomes and the long-term rate of reduction in recidivism in the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals they have worked with over the years, the Prison Fellowship asserts that religious conversion not only has the potential to reduce recidivism but also the rate of infractions in the lives of the formerly incarcerated as well.

Faith-based organizations argue that with their cadre of prison volunteers and religious programs, their approach to adequate reintegration of the former inmate is both measurable and tangible. It is evidence-based and results-oriented. "Though it is not widely known, there is empirical evidence that religious volunteers, religious programs, and faith-based organizations can positively influence the rehabilitation of prisoners" (Johnson B., July 2011). The Prison Fellowship is committed to what is termed "transformational ministry." Among its many approaches, the fellowship methodologically asserts a "sacred secular partnership" approach conceptually influenced by faith-based principles and the U.S. Department of Labor. This relationship, it argues, has

benefited the Department of Labor "Ready4work" three-year pilot program with the focus on "job training, job placement, case management, mentoring, and other aftercare services" (Johnson B., July 2011).

Both Bolkas's and the Prison Fellowship's conclusions underscore the claim that religion has the potential to reduce recidivism. This claim is based on the argument that the formerly incarcerated person's chances of adequate reintegration are enhanced by having a conversion experience and going through the process of religious and spiritual training. (From a different religious tradition, the Nation of Islam has an established track record of reclaiming black prisoners and guiding them into productive lives. Malcolm X was the most prominent example. Muhammad's Mosque #11 in Dorchester works in eight penal institutions in Massachusetts.) Religion's definition of crime is fundamentally informed by the notion of redemption. It asserts that the criminal or offender can be redeemed, rehabilitated, and adequately reintegrated. These principles and concepts are the hallmarks of every religion. This claim is fundamentally informed by the principles of restorative justice.

Restorative justice basically argues that sentencing in the criminal justice system must be tempered with the emphasis on holistically restoring the offender to the community. According to Howard Zehr, retributive justice is when "crime is a violation of the state, defined by lawbreaking and guilt. Justice determines blame and administers pain in a contest between the offender and the state directed by systematic rules" (Zehr, 1990). On the contrary, restorative justice is when "crime is a violation of people and relationships. It creates obligations to make things right. Justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions that promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance" (Zehr, 1990). Fundamental to restorative justice is holistic healing that involves different facets of human relationships and connections. For John W. De Gruchy, restorative justice implies justice that is "reconciliatory." "Reconciliation," he argues "is, indeed, an action, praxis and movement before it becomes a

theory or dogma, something celebrated before it is explained.... Reconciliation is properly understood as a process in which we become engaged at the heart of the struggle for justice and peace in the world" (De Gruchy, 2002). Restorative justice reconciles the offender and the offended in the presence of the community for the healing of all parties. Gerry Johnstone articulates this point by arguing that restorative justice

> Revolves around the ideas that crime is, in essence, a violation of a *person* by another person (rather than a violation of legal rules); that in responding to a crime our primary concerns should be to make offenders aware of the harm they have caused, to get them to understand and meet their liability to repair such harm, and to ensure that further offences are prevented...the measures to be taken to prevent re-offending should be decided collectively by offenders, victims and members of their communities through constructive dialogue in an informal and consensual process; and that efforts should be made to improve the relationship between the offender and victim and to reintegrate the offender into the law-abiding community (Johnstone, 2002).

The 2003 studies of Byron Johnson and David Larson on adult prisoners document the rate of recidivism through InnerChange's Freedom Initiative. The study reported that "inmates who were most active in Bible studies were significantly less likely to be rearrested during the follow-up period" (Johnson B., June 2003), in contrast to inmates who did not attend such meetings. InnerChange is a Christian mission that works among the poor.

In contrast to the restorative justice system, the retributive justice system basically operates on the notion that "once a criminal always a criminal." The major proponent of this view was German philosopher George W. F. Hegel. In his book, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argued that everyone has what he referred to as "abstract"

right that we assert by means of our will. But the state is sovereign. The sovereignty of the state supersedes individual right. This dynamic of state right versus individual right is poignantly reflected in Hegel's notion of crime and punishment.

According to Hegel, "crime in itself is an infinite injury" (Hegel, 1991). Crime as an infinite injury implies that crime affects the criminal's rights as a citizen in the state. Since the state is supreme, Hegel argued that it is the state that is primarily affected by the crime. Crime is inherently the violation of the rights of the state as a supreme entity. The criminal has used his right to violate the rights of the state by his or her crime; therefore, the rights of the criminal must be "cancelled." The right to commit crime must be punished by the right of the state to take away the rights of the one who has offended the state. This transaction ultimately renders the offender a rightless member of the state. He or she is a citizen of the state, but a rightless citizen. The criminal is punished, but his or her punishment does not restore rights. Hegel believes a criminal cannot be rehabilitated. He wrote: "If the concept and criterion of his punishment are not derived from his own act; and he is also denied it if he is regarded simply as a harmful animal which must be rendered harmless" (Hegel, 1991). The sovereign can pardon the offender, but in the realm of the physical, the criminal remains a criminal for life—a rightless citizen:

> Pardon is the remission of punishment, but it is not a cancellation of right. On the contrary, right continues to apply, and the pardoned individual still remains a criminal; the pardon does not state that he has not committed a crime. This cancellation [*Aufhebung*] of punishment may be effected by religion, for what has been done can be undone in spirit by spirit itself. But in so far as it is accomplished in this world, it is to be found only in the majesty [of the sovereign] and is the prerogative of [the sovereign's] ungrounded decision. (Hegel, 1991)

Once a criminal always a criminal is the establishment and execution of the fundamental right of the state against the right of the individual who has broken its laws. Hegel's notion of crime and punishment is reflected in the present norm of sentencing associated with the American penal system and the mass incarceration of blacks in the 21st century. In her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,* Michelle Alexander argues the following:

> The most obvious parallel is legalized discrimination. Like Jim Crow, mass incarceration marginalizes large segments of the African American community, segregates them physically (in prisons, jails, and ghettos), and then authorizes discrimination against them in voting, employment, housing, education, public benefit, and jury service. The federal courts system has effectively immunized the current system from challenges on the grounds of racial bias, much as earlier systems of control were protected and endorsed by the U.S. Supreme Court…. Indeed, the stigma of criminality functions in much the same way that the stigma of race once did. It justifies a legal, social and economic boundary between 'us' and 'them' (Alexander, 2010).

In 2003, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) conducted a study titled *Prisoner Reentry, Religion and Research*. The goal of the study was to ascertain the validity of religion and religious experience to reduce infractions and thus recidivism in the life of the former prisoner. The operating question was the viability of religion and religious experience in the life of the prisoner to prevent him or her from returning to prison. The study "discusses trends in corrections, the role of religion in reentry, and current research…points out that the faith community is perhaps a partner in prisoner reentry—promoting public safety via the provision of services to support the successful reintegration of returning prisoners" (Services, 2004).

The HHS study discovered that across the nation former prisoners were returning to their communities after long years behind bars ill-prepared for postprison life, experiencing difficulties reconnecting with their families, finding housing accommodations and employment, dealing with drug abuse, and grappling with mental health illnesses, with close to "62 percent of state prisoners...arrested within 3 years after release. Other results show that 41 percent of releases are returned incarceration. Still other results show that 42 percent of parolees are returned to incarceration following discharge from parole supervision" (Services, 2004). The study particularly highlighted the "cycle of incarceration" for minority men in predominantly urban communities and the salient perpetuation of "social and economic disadvantages" associated with the high rate of incarceration.

It concluded that the role of faith-based organizations is pivotal to the process of strategic solution development and intervention in the high rate of incarceration and recidivism evident in the U.S. prison system. It highlights the historical role of faith-based organizations in providing social services through philanthropic actions and religious services behind bars to holistically meet the needs of prisoners. It sees religious organizations' engagement in prison ministry outreach in collaboration with criminal justice agencies as pivotal to the reduction in the high rate of recidivism.

The study also underscores that religion and religious programs have the potential to facilitate adequate reentry for the prisoner: "Results show that religious programs combat the negative effects of prison culture and that religious volunteers are a largely untapped resource pool available to administer educational, vocational, and treatment services at little or no cost" (Services, 2004). While the study candidly intimates the need for more "rigorous" research in validating religion's potential in facilitating prisoner reentry and reintegration, it concludes with the following assertion: "American prisons are in crisis. Overcrowded prison systems, record numbers of prisoners returning home, and escalating confinement costs have profound implications for corrections and communities. The faith community, however, is perhaps a partner in prisoner reentry, and is uniquely positioned to provide a variety of services to support the successful reintegration of

returning prisoners. Religious program research may hold a valuable key to developing criminal justice system solutions" (Services, 2004).

The prognosis of the Department of Health and Human Services that religion could be a valuable tool in dealing with the bourgeoning issue of reentry and in reducing recidivism must be analyzed within the context of religion's emphasis on redemption and rehabilitation. Religion fundamentally believes that the offender can be rehabilitated and redeemed. This notion of redemption is defined within the context of restorative justice—that the offender can be adequately reintegrated in the society as a viable and contributing member. The notion of a second chance, however, is negated by the retributive justice system.

The Center for Church and Prison, Inc. embarked upon the collection of data to scientifically establish that the disproportionate rate of incarceration of blacks from Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan within the Massachusetts Department of Correction is linked to sociopolitical, economic, and existential consequences, and to research the viability of religion, in this case this black Church, as a viable partner in mitigating some of the long-term consequences of incarceration, especially in reducing the high rate of recidivism associated with black prisoners.

This research indicates that blacks in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan are most often incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses. While murder and other forms of violent behavior were cited as other reasons why loved ones were incarcerated, many respondents indicated that the imprisonment of their loved ones was due primarily to the War on Drugs. It was not within the purview of this study to ascertain whether the loved one was a user or a seller.

Based on the above data, the study discovered that the disproportionate rate of state prison incarceration of blacks from Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan in Boston is having grave sociopolitical, economic, and existential implications on black families located in these communities. Black families in these areas who experience the incarceration of a loved one are faced with the challenges of keeping their families together as a result of increases in single parenting, fatherlessness, the constant fear of losing another loved one to the

prison system, and ultimately, the breakdown of the family. In addition, the study revealed that the incarceration of a parent often contributes to a child dropping out of school.

The survey results further indicate that the disproportionate rate of incarceration of blacks from Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan in state prisons is indicative of sociopolitical and economic marginalization and isolation on a general level of Boston's black community. This is reflected in a decline in income, living on public assistance, and difficulty sustaining economic mobility. Many respondents reported that the incarceration of the breadwinner fundamentally undermined the financial stability of the family. Families were susceptible to dysfunctional family characteristics with the incarceration of the family's breadwinner.

In addition to the above findings, the study discovered that as a result of the incarceration of their loved ones, relatives begin to develop various forms of mental health illnesses. These are reflected in increases in suicidal tendencies and depression associated with the loss of loved ones, loneliness, and loss of relational support and stability.

Many respondents indicated that the role of churches in mitigating some of the consequences of incarceration was pivotal to the process of reducing the disproportionate rate of incarceration. Families affected by the incarceration of their loved one found solace and guidance in religion as a means of coping with the existential implications.

The research also shows that churches with reentry programs catering to those released from prison and expressing concerns about those incarcerated were more highly recognized than those that did not show any concern for those incarcerated. In addition, faith-based forms of reentry and rehabilitation or restoration were seen as pivotal to preventing their loved ones from returning to prison.

That religion fundamentally caters to the inmates' holistic well being is reflected in the fact that religion's concept of rehabilitation pursues the revitalization of the inherent worth of the offender as a human being. That recognition is poignant in the process of restoration because it establishes the grounds for rationality, subjectivity, existential awareness, personhood, and individuality, elements inte-

gral to restoring the offender in the process of adequate reintegration. This perspective contrasts to the notion that the offender is beyond redemption and cannot be granted a second chance.

The concept of rationality indicates the ability of the offender to reason, intellectually ponder his actions, and intelligently seek alternative courses of action. These are inherently nonnegotiable elements of their humanity. Criminal offenders are not bereft of intellectual capabilities and exercises.

The recognition of their subjectivity is intricately related to their sense of personhood. Materialism and sociopolitical and economic consciousness often militates against the inherent subjectivity of the person and relegates the person's inherent worth to "thinghood." Objectivity reflects itself in the historical process of subjugation and distortion of the "other" for sociopolitical and economic domination and profiteering. But the criminal or offender, regardless of the individual's offense and violation of the social contract is still, and will inherently remain, a human being, capable of negotiating his or her actions regardless of social location or dislocation.

Existential awareness of one's subjectivity is ultimately significant. It indicates the awareness of one's sociohistorical and cultural development in a particular setting. The felt experiences associated with one's existential awareness informs one's view of his or her social milieu. The disproportionate incarceration of a racial group in the criminal justice system existentially borders on the following:

- **Self-distortion**: Expressed through the habit of accepting as their own the stereotype that the majority imposes on members of the minority"
- "**Self-deception:** Reflected in the conviction that one has internalized this false consciousness to feel safe and secure but is not"
- "**Self-destruction**: Takes place when the internalization of the particular stereotype has come to fruition and the individual assumes the identity of what he or she is struggling against" (Walters-Sleyon, 2013).

The concept of personhood and individuality are related. They resist the notion of collectivism and forms of marginalization that distort, deceive, and ultimately destroy. Personhood and individual-

ity are inherent elements of the human being, negating elements of alienation, annihilation, and existential angst that sociopolitically influence and inform self-destructive practices. The social milieus that function on the notion of "they" versus "us" fundamentally eclipse and negate the natural existence of human flourishing for all. *All* becomes an oxymoron coded to propagate the salient language of human divisiveness and marginalization. Evident in laws, rules, public policies, and mechanics of economic survival, prisons alienate, marginalize, and ultimately establish the nonexistence and inclusion of others.

The role of religion is to save human beings. The religion of Jesus Christ cannot remain passive to the existential plights of its members. Scientifically proven and empirically established, religion is an integral component in the revitalization of lives, marriages, and communities made dysfunctional and incapacitated as a result of the tentacle of punitive policies and racialized forms of punishment. Religion is a potential ally in reducing the high rate of recidivism associated with mass incarceration in the Massachusetts Department of Correction and the entire country's prison system. The intricate relationship between religion and recidivism is reflected in the countless lives that now reflect alternative courses of action embarked upon and influenced by the ethos-geist of religious conversion.

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Notes